This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

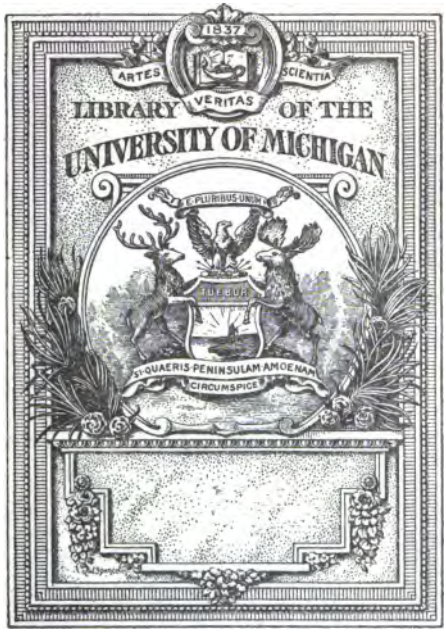
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`



Digitized by Google

828
N197w

Digitized by Google

a/u

Digitized by Google

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

2850

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR.

A Historical Romance.

BY

GEN. SIR CHARLES NAPIER, G.C.B.

ETC. ETC.

POSTHUMOUS WORK.

LIEUT.-GEN. SIR WILLIAM NAPIER, K.C.B.

EDITOR.

LONDON:

G. ROUTLEDGE & CO. FARRINGDON STREET

NEW YORK: 18, BEEKMAN STREET.

1858.

The Author reserves the Right of Translation.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

EDITOR'S PREFACE.

THIS Romance was written about 1837, when Sir C. Napier was suffering under the injustice of Sir Frederick Adam. The preface is a humorous allusion to himself, as Mr. Peter Grievous, vainly seeking redress; for to laugh at, and joke upon his own misfortunes, was with him an absolute necessity. The blow given to his commander was indeed metaphorical, but never forgotten or forgiven — a book exposing the red-tapism and injustice of official power was inexpiable.

Some resemblance will be found in parts to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton's romance of "Harold;" especially the creation of the Vala. But Sir C. Napier's work was composed years before Sir Edward's was published. It was originally called Harold also, and was sent to Mr. Colburn, the designed publisher, who kept it for many months: indeed it was with much trouble Sir Charles could get it back. That Sir Edward then read the manuscript, and gave an opinion to Colburn on its merit,—a favourable opinion,—seems certain.

Sarcastic political irony runs through the Romance of "William the Conqueror:" it was excited at the time of writing by the Reform agitation; and it is not a little remarkable that most of the rules for good government so pointed at, were afterwards realized by the Author in Scinde, when he had conquered that province.

W. NAPIER,

Lieut.-General.

Recd. O. 5. 15 88. E.M.S.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

READER, a preface to a book is like a brass collar on a gentleman's dog; therefore this book shall have a preface; and the reader should give it *his best attention*, as a Secretary of State would promise, when called upon to examine into some matter to which he has not the slightest intention of giving any *attention* at all, and which probably he would not understand if he did.

Now for my preface. I have edited this history for my friend, Mr. Peter Grievous, a full cornet upon half-pay, dwelling discontentedly in the town of Caen, but hoping to draw from the public certain sums of money.

Cornet Grievous has been extremely ill-used by the Horse Guards.

Cornet Grievous served full one year in the 1st regiment of Life Guards, the greatest part of which period was passed in the unhealthy climate of Knightsbridge, amidst the noxious exhalations of *mountain dew*, and other miasmata, highly injurious to the constitution.

His severe trials caused a violent scorbutic humour to cover the whole extremity of his nose, producing debility of constitution, and irritability of temperament. The first

Digitized by Google

generally prevented his performing any duty, except that of regularly drawing his pay; the second became so great, that after many other insolences and acts of indiscipline, both towards those *he* commanded, and towards those who commanded *him*, he one day lost all command of *himself* and struck his superior officer!—For this he was very cruelly cashiered by a general court-martial; and it was strongly rumoured that some ferocious members talked of shooting him, so blood-thirsty does the dreadful trade of war make these legalized butchers!

His Majesty, feeling some tenderness for a man whose health had been sacrificed in the service of his country, restored my ill-used cousin to his commission, but placed him on half-pay, with an assurance in public orders, that he should never again serve his Majesty in any other capacity. Royalty, advised by the Commander-in-Chief, was so obdurate on this point that my gallant cousin, finding it impossible to get on full-pay, then applied for the Guelphic order of knighthood, to commemorate his boldness—evinced in striking a commanding officer of huge stature, exceedingly large moustaches, and standing in the midst of his myrmidons—Grievous being only a *King John's man*—five feet nothing! He failed!

Digitized by Google

INTRODUCTION,

BY PETER GRIEVOUS.

CAEN, 1837.

THE public should know in what manner I became possessed of the original manuscript containing the history of William the Conqueror. I am a man of advanced age, very ill-looking, and much worse tempered; discontent seems to be my trade in this world, and therefore I am careful of my health.

I am fond of walking alone, and then my face becomes marvellously fixed and wizened; on such occasions, I look as Sir Hudson Lowe did when he turned Napoleon's coffee sour! With this look, one day, walking near the town of Caen, cursing French roads, where the ditches are little more than ruts, and the ruts little less than ditches, I suddenly came upon a romantic-looking, fortress-like ruin. The chivalry of the dark ages rose before me.

"Zounds!" said I, "here have been men of tilt and tournament ere now! this must have been the dwelling of some ancient vagabond with his pot-lid and spit! From this fortress he sallied forth like a spider upon a

Digitized by Google

fly, or the keeper of an English turnpike on a traveller. Let us learn the story of this ancient highwayman's den."

I accosted a French farmer who stood at the gate.

"What is the history of this cursed old house?"

He returned as cross a look as my own, but made no answer. He was a huge, broad-faced Norman knave, looking as if he had kept bullocks all his life, and grown half into one himself. I did not look if he had horns, for a pretty little Frenchwoman came to the gate, and I reasoned by analogy. "Sir," said I again, to the semi-bullock, "What building have you here?"

"The Gendarmerie Monsieur," answered his pretty wife, smartly.

"The devil fetch the gendarmes" quoth I; "one can't take a pinch of snuff in France, but a gendarme has his finger in your box."

"But sir, this gendarmerie was built a thousand years ago! Will you see the place?"

"Willingly."

Having examined the ruins, I was about to take leave, when the lively brunette, who had given me full information upon all those subjects with which she was acquainted, and of which I was peculiarly desirous of remaining ignorant, observed, that her husband, digging in his garden, had found an iron box, which she would show me, as "Monsieur was apparently a judge of antiquities."

The lady showed her iron box: it contained an old ma-

Digitized by Google

nuscript, professing to be, "*The History of William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy.*" Written in very old French, and wrapped in a wax cloth, it remained in excellent preservation, and is here translated into our own language.

PETER GRIEVOUS.

N.B.—One of our contemporaries has justly advised, that in novels, too many words should not be drawn from the obsolete glossary of ancient times. The advice is good when fictions are to be composed; but in a veracious translation from an authenticated original, like the present work, this caution is not necessary; for the Saxon actors spoke Saxon, and the Nordmans spoke the ancient Norman dialect.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR.

CHAPTER I.

Sir William Mallet, a Norman knight,—
Remember how he once could fight.

I AM now one hundred years of age. Half a century has rolled by since we fought at Hastings; and with those years have passed away my friends! Amongst those Norman warriors, few were older than myself; and even the oldest trod with a firm step, and struck a heavy blow. The sun of life then shone bright and steady; but the clouds of death have arisen, and my rays of joy are now faint and rare. The companions of my boyhood are all dead! Dead are they also, at whose side I tilted in the tournament and fought in the battle! Friends and foes are now alike to me. I look down upon the past as the towering eagle casts his keen glance upon the earth below. And, alas! alas! wherever my thoughts fly, they alight upon a grave—the grave of some companion! This is age! This is what we covet! This is that life to which we wretched mortals cling! The bitterest days of suffering have passed and leave no pain—the proudest are gone and leave no comfort! But let these sad reflections cease. Let me chronicle events while my memory is clear and strong; giving my experience to the young, and then let the tomb receive me.

I was born at Caen, and bred as became a man of high lineage. My horse, my sword, my lance, and myself were inseparable. A monk of Bayeux, where the Scandinavian language is still cultivated, ofttimes read to me about the exploits of the heroes of the Edda. The dying song of Lodbrok was my delight. I, too, longed to "*strike with the glaive*," for my blood was from the warriors of Odin, and like

Digitized by Google

my ancestors I thirsted for battle. Nature had cast me in a gigantic mould; few men could rival me in strength when I had reached my twentieth year. Taciturn in disposition, I spoke but little at the festive board, but in the combat my shout was terrible. My comrades, seeing that my blows fell heavy, called me "*The Mallet.*" It became familiar; and, having borne it eighty years, I preserve it for their sakes by whom it was bestowed, and have given it to my children instead of *Ragnar*, which was the name I inherited from my Scandinavian ancestors.

Thus much of myself.

Now for the history of my great master, William, duke of Normandy and king of England.

Here, writes his amanuensis, the young and lively Robert Wace, Sir William Mallet drew up his tall figure, as his arms rested on his high-backed elbow-chair of English oak; his look was solemn and pious, his eyes directed to heaven, his brows contracted, as if in suffering: for a few moments he seemed thoughtful, and then exclaimed, "O God! what is life!—what is memory! But, come, let us begin our labour."

"Perhaps, noble sir, you have difficulty in remembering things so long passed," observed his youthful scribe, respectfully.

"No, boy; but I have much difficulty in forgetting: mighty men and mighty deeds congregate in my mind, and I seek to marshal them in their places and their dates; and every place and date brings crowds to my thoughts and to my heart. This is my difficulty, good youth; I want to forget. Alas! it is easy to remember."

The knight paused for a while, and then continued:—

I will begin my narrative by a brief account of the state of Normandy during the life of Robert, the father of William the Conqueror. It will give a better understanding of the times I have to describe.

Here the knight again fell into a reverie, seeking to recover the past by the scintillations of his memory: so sunbeams piercing through small chinks, oftentimes illuminate, by pencils of brilliant but powdery light, the recesses of some dark cavern.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER II.

The State of Normandy doth show,
Setting her dukes all in a row.

It is known that Richard, the second of that name, was fourth duke of Normandy; that he left his eldest son, Richard the Third, heir to the dukedom, and that to his second son, Robert, he gave the earldom of Exmes, on condition that he did homage to his brother, the duke, as his liege lord.

Now, Robert, upon his father's death, revolted against his brother, and threw himself into the town of Falaise, where he hoped to make an efficacious resistance; but Duke Richard besieged the town, and forced him to obedience. However, returning to Rouen, after the siege, the duke, with many of his friends, died suddenly by poison, and public opinion fixed the crime upon Robert. Of the justice of this opinion we cannot now judge. However, a few years after, Robert became duke, to the prejudice of his nephew Nicholas, the natural son of Richard the Third. The reasons why this child did not succeed to the dukedom are very clear (not because he was a natural son, for that, besides being doubtful, would, if certain, make no bar to the succession, according to the Norman laws). But Nicholas was an infant, and his father dying suddenly was thereby prevented from the exercise of his right to nominate a successor. The uncle of Nicholas was a powerful chief; the nobles had therefore to choose between a child who, not having been named successor to the duchy, had but an implied claim to their fealty on the one hand, and on the other, a strong baron, who stood armed to enforce his demand of the dukedom.

When men are so situated they seldom hesitate. Robert, count of Exmes, was at once installed in the duchy of Normandy, and his nephew Nicholas consigned to the more tranquil life of a monastery.

Digitized by Google

There does not appear to be any good reason to find fault with the decision made by the Norman barons, because there can be no inherent right in a child to rule over men, except such right be given by the law, and that law be advantageous to the people. Now the Norman law gave no such right to this child, though it had a natural claim which perhaps ought to have been admitted, if it could have been attended to with safety; but this, so far from being the case, was precisely the reverse, and an attempt to proclaim Nicholas duke of Normandy would have probably deluged the country in blood. Robert then became duke of Normandy.

No sooner was this chief in possession of his dukedom, than his uncle, the archbishop of Rouen, his cousins, Hugh, bishop of Bayeux, and William de Belesme, earl of Alençon, together with Alain, duke of Brittany, drew the sword against Duke Robert. The two bishops he quickly put down, but the warlike William de Belesme, surnamed Talvas, was more resolute in his rebellion than the bishops. Duke Robert was, however, too strong, and Talvas being besieged, surrendered himself a prisoner, and went through the humiliating ceremony—not unusual in those days—of presenting himself bareheaded and barefooted, with a saddle fixed on his back, that the victor might ride, if so it pleased him to do!

Such a peace did not last longer than was necessary to the disgraced Talvas. He again took arms to obtain vengeance, was unsuccessful, and lost his own life, and the lives of three out of his four bold and ferocious sons—Guérin, Faulkes, Robert, and William. Of these, the last only survived, and received the surname of his father, Talvas.

Robert then overpowered his last enemy, the duke of Brittany, who, after a troublesome war, acknowledged the sovereignty of Duke Robert; and the latter thus remained undisputed master of Normandy.

At this period, Beaudouin, earl of Flanders, contracted a marriage between his son Beaudouin and Adèle, daughter of Robert the Pious, king of France, by Queen Constance. The young Beaudouin rebelled, and overthrew his father, who fled to Normandy. Duke Robert received him, and raising

Digitized by Google

troops, fell upon Flanders with great fury, overran it, and established the old earl in his sovereignty of that country.

No sooner had this good deed been so boldly executed, than the court of Robert saw another exile arrive. King Robert of France, surnamed the Pious, died, and left his son Henry to succeed; but Constance, the stepmother of Henry, chased him from the throne, and he fled for succour to Duke Robert of Normandy. This able man saw the advantage of assisting an exiled king, not banished by his subjects, but by the unnatural hostility of his mother, who wanted to place a younger brother on the throne. Duke Robert once more then drew the sword in favour of a wronged sovereign, overthrew the troops of Constance in every battle, and replaced Henry on the throne. For this good service, Henry increased his dukedom by the acquirement of Pontoise, Chaumont, Giros, and, in short, all the territory known by the name of the French Vexin, whose earl, Dragon, was married to the sister of Edward, called the Confessor, king of England.

At this period a great famine befell the land, and as it is the most distant event I can remember, it shall here be shortly described.

CHAPTER III.

How Normandy was in a hobble,
And hungry men did children gobble.

THE awful scourge of famine, which the ignorance and frailty of men occasionally inflict upon nations, raged through the land with unsparing violence. It began by an extraordinary abundance of wild herbs, which sprung up with a wonderful profusion and devoured the grain; the crops perished. From the earl to the churl all were sorely pressed by this terrible pest. The rich and powerful obtained a scanty supply of food by force of arms, while thousands of the poor fell victims to want. The times were ferocious, but hunger turned men into wolves; even

Digitized by Google

the gentle became fierce, and humanity seemed to have abandoned the human heart.

I well remember the events of this period.

At that time my father lived where the church of St. Etienne now stands; it was without the walls of Caen; but he was potent, and the potent may dwell where they please. Even now, boy, in these troubled times, who dare insult old William Mallet in the midst of his strong *gens d'armerie?* None, by the Rood! none! No, not even yon proud and noble city of Caen, with its strong walls and frowning castle, its torrent-swept ditches and its rock-built towers! Were Caen and the strong Mallet to quarrel, fair youth, the saucy citizens should soon learn that the head of an old warrior is more dangerous than the arm of a young soldier. I would, from this stronghold, so close their river, that not alone their boats of commerce, but their very fishes should not visit Caen! But to continue.

One terrible evening my family were as usual assembled, when sounds of tumult were heard, and cries of distress followed, so piercing, that, accustomed as we were to horrors, and conscious of the danger which attended any interference between famine and food, we sallied forth, well armed, in case of need. Ah, me! the sight which soon presented itself was piteous! A gentleman, no longer able to protect himself in the country, had sought shelter within Caen. Thinking himself safe when close to the walls, he and his servants doffed their armour, and laid it on the carts, one of which carried his wife and children. No sooner had they proceeded a few steps than a band of desperate men, who were lying in ambush for plunder, fell upon the unhappy family. Short was the struggle, loud the screams they sent forth, but ere we arrived they were all murdered, and their assassins prepared to resist us.

"Villains!" quoth my father, "what have ye done?"

"Done!" retorted they; "done, sayest thou? Why, what all do that famish—sought for food, sir knight, and found it; nor shalt thou and thy followers take it from us."

There was such famine in their look, such determination in their mien, that our blood curdled within us. We could, perhaps, have destroyed them, but we felt fearfully attacked

Digitized by Google

ourselves by the terrible impulse under which they acted; each man felt sickened by his own dreadful thoughts, and in agony we returned to our home.

"The hand of God is heavy upon the land," said my father, as he encountered the terrified looks of my mother. "Ask me not questions, for I can tell you of nought but horror; when hunger begins, dread deeds follow. Let us pray and abide events; they close around us in fearful forms. For many days our own food has been insufficient, and where to get more I know not. The hand of God is upon the land."

So saying, he looked upon us all for a few moments, and then threw himself down, all armed as he was, upon the bed, and covering his face, spoke no more that night. We all went to bed; few slept,—famine had begun its workings.

The magistrates seized upon food for distribution; none were allowed to have more than the portion allotted by the authorities, and this was the same through the whole country: all were starving.

The next day we went armed into the town, to receive our allotted portion of aliment. Passing through the Place St. Martin we saw an execution; the governor, in his endeavours to preserve his rule, and afford protection to the inhabitants, had ordered the death of a wretched man who had forced a guard, and seized upon food. The gallows was surrounded by the armed burghers and the spearmen of the castle. All seemed downcast, weak, and emaciated; a strong force of bowmen lined that part of the walls which looked upon the place of execution. The curious crowd pressed upon the armed men; their looks were terrible, their pale and hunger-worn faces, their anxious, fiery eyes, beaming from sunken sockets, were appalling. They cried aloud for bread; it was one shriek of Bread! bread! bread! The culprit alone seemed happy. The executioner proceeded with his sad labour; my blood runs cold as I think upon that famished multitude of citizens.

We proceeded towards the church of St. Pierre, at the door of which provisions were issued, and again were our feelings harassed by doleful sounds and sad sights. The

Digitized by Google

groans of families dying with hunger issued from every smaller house; the whole city seemed one cavern of despair; while from the strong, fortified houses of the nobles issued bands of armed men, resolved to take food wherever they could find it. Human bones were scattered in the streets; where the flesh was gone, no man asked; it had not been eaten by dogs—there were none; yet all had been devoured! the heart sickened at its own thoughts.

In passing near the church, a small armed body of desperate men offered cooked meat for sale, at an enormous price. My eye fell upon one. I recognized the leader of the band whom we had spoken with the evening before. I turned my eyes away and staggered forward. "Holy Virgin! pardon me, sinner that I am!" thought I, forcing myself forward. I dared not look back at the proffered meat: hunger and horror were at fearful strife within me!

We went on—our turn came—our portion was held out, and with desperate struggling we got hold of it; my mother and sisters absorbed every feeling—I was the strongest man in Caen, and ferociously struck down all who approached the loaf given to my charge. All were feeble, and all within reach of my blows were felled by my heavy gauntletted hand. We thus returned through the scene of suffering, where no man helped his neighbour—few could help themselves!

At length the long wished-for harvest came, and the owners guarded it with desperate valour. Armed knights patrolled through the country, and every nerve was strained to preserve the coming food from the starving multitude; much was lost, but that which was preserved miraculously equalled the harvest of five ordinary years, and plenty again blessed the earth.

At Rouen the suffering was less. The virtuous Bishop Ausbert, their prelate, was remarkable among the clergy of his time, who were men careless of the commands of our Saviour: the Son of man and of God rode upon an ass, but our clergy drove chariots, and rode upon horses richly caparisoned; they followed the chase, they mixed in state affairs. "My kingdom is not of this world," said our Lord; yet the priests were given up to this world, wading through blood

Digitized by Google

in search of pelf. Not only were they magistrates, but even warriors clad in steel; and while they exclaimed with the Pharisee, "Thank God, we are not as other men are," they worshipped lucre more than they worshipped God.

But Ausbert was one whose habit was not more holy than his heart. When the famine appeared, he not only parted with all his own wealth, but sold that of the church to distribute to the poor. "For the poor do we hold it," said the good teacher of the faith, "and to the poor let it be given in the hour of their need."

Followed by those whom his virtue animated, the venerable Christian perambulated the streets — waiting upon misery; where distress was, there was the holy father, administering food, and pouring forth the comfort of religion. The wretched received from his hands that portion of food which the entire sacrifice of his temporal riches enabled him to purchase and to bestow among them. They were cheered also by his spiritual exhortations: those came from his heart; God spake comfort through his lips, and men believed; for while the bishop preached patience, he shared their sufferings.

In compliance with our customs, he gave an entertainment at his inauguration to the rich and powerful of Normandy; but there were two tables, and at the lower table were placed the poor and miserable: among these sat the bishop.

"Here," said he, "is my place; to comfort the afflicted is my avocation;" and a comforter did the afflicted find him in the hour of trial — scorning alike riches and rest! Wherever famine raged, there was his crosier to be seen, there was his generous hand, his lowly heart, and his high mind, bent upon serving God and helping man.

The consequences of this venerable prelate's exertions were incalculable: the minor clergy dared not do otherwise, and the riches of the Church were exhausted upon the poor.

Thus, the people at Rouen suffered less than at Caen; the good deed came, and with it came the word of God; so that all eyes and all hearts looked up to heaven. When Ausbert's foot crossed the threshold of the poor man, all

Digitized by Google

within was peace and resignation, and comfort and confidence in that great Being who alone can help us, and in whose name he gave food and exhortation. Does not the voice of the hero, rising above the din of battle, animate his warriors to the charge? and shall not the mild voice of a Christian teacher, pouring forth hope to virtue and pardon to repentance, cheer hearts broken and sad? We behold him calm in the midst of worldly dangers; we see him cheerful in the midst of worldly sorrows; the smile of contempt curls upon his lips at worldly temptations, and we believe him when he preaches FAITH, HOPE, and CHARITY to man! He rolls not in chariots, he wallows not in sin; his life is the guarantee of his sincerity. But when a proud priesthood is bloated with riches and swollen with ambition, it draws down the vengeance of God. Then men, unable to endure its insolence, break the desecrated Church to pieces, and stone its servants with the fragments. The Almighty thus vindicates religion from the invasions of hypocrisy.

The year following this great famine died Hadiaise, duchess of Normandy, aunt to Duke Robert. She was a widow; and her husband, Duke Geoffroy, was slain in a strange way. Returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he entered an inn with his hawk upon his wrist, as is becoming to all great lords who have regard to their own high dignity, and to the respect of those who behold them. The bird being excited by the view of a fat hen in the yard, and possibly allowing his conscience some latitude in consideration of having made a pilgrimage to the Holy City, pounced upon the unoffending hen, and tore her to pieces. The innkeeper, who thought much of a cockle-shell with the fish in it, held it cheap when empty, although placed in the hat of a ducal pilgrim, and seemed to think as little of the head as he did of the hat; for furious, instead of proud, at seeing his hen die so honourably, the enraged churl seized a stone, and, hurling it with deadly force, struck the duke from his horse with a mortal blow.

Thus the noble aunt of Robert the Devil became an inconsolable widow; yet, such were the disorders of those times among the wild Bretons, that this vile churl, who

Digitized by Google

destroyed the noble duke of Bretagne, was probably only burned alive for his atrocious act, which ought naturally to have been expiated by several days of exquisite torture, such as the good and great Duke William would have applied, for he well knew the respect due from base-born vassals to their lords! Holy Virgin! how he made them repent; and how pleasant and stern he looked when directing the executioner not to hurry the torture: "Speed him not so fast," he would exclaim, "the caitiff will grow numb, and take no pleasure in my largesse!"

Alas! alas! the good old days, when belted knights were respected by the vulgar, have passed in Normandy; but in England, the Saxon vulgar are still kept in due submission. Our Norman chevaliers nobly uphold their dignity with the sword and the rack: the land they won with hardy blows, they hold with wholesome severity.

Here the old warrior looked so stern, says his amanuensis—in a note of his own, of which several are still legible—that I trembled lest he should have imagined any looks of mine to be disrespectful; in which case he would have set me on the fire, or used any other means of torture which came to his hand; for though a good and kind master, he was very hasty and obdurate, if he thought due respect was not paid him; indeed, an old squire of his told me, that once in battle his master nearly lost his life in the rescue of a Saxon slave, whom he saved with great generosity and desperate courage; yet a few days after, thinking the man disrespectful, he slit his nose, and cut off his ears. The recollection of this cutting of ears made mine feel in the highest degree agitated. My fears were vain, and he proceeded:—

The duke of Normandy had now overthrown all his enemies at home; his subjects were obedient; he had reinstated the deposed earl of Flanders; he had seated King Henry upon the throne of France; all his foes but one were down under his feet—that one was his conscience!

This troublesome and redoubted enemy he had been unable to subdue; whether the horrible crime of fratricide pressed him with dreadful weight, as years carried him forward on the swift-rolling wheels of time, or, if guiltless, that

Digitized by Google

his soul trembled at the thoughts of other delinquencies, we know not; but it is certain that Robert the Devil felt it high time to prepare for that awful meeting with the King of kings, when he would have to answer the question, pendent like the sword of Damocles,—"How hast thou lived?"

The duke, however, prepared for that day of retribution, and, by way of closing his worldly accounts, resolved to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, thereby to lighten the colour of his conscience, if not altogether whiten it. Heaven forefend that I should speak irreverently of any sovereign, dead or living; but I repeat the jests of the day. Bless the mark, and thanks be to the Virgin, I never joined in them, whether in the tent or under the vaulted saloon of arms, where I loved to spend my time. Nor did I join ribalds at the feast; I was ever silent, except in battle; but then, boy, I was like a reaper in the field; my sword was deadly, my war-cry like the thunder of heaven! Now I am old; my blow would scarce stagger an armed man, nor will the present race believe what I could once do!

Sir William was silent for a moment, thinking of his former prowess.

Duke Robert made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; but before he left Rouen, assembled all the great men of the duchy, with the archbishop at their head, and to them he presented his natural son William, the future conqueror of England.

The boy was then eight years of age, of goodly appearance, with great promise of thews and sinews, long of limb and with a full chest and daring mien—somewhat clumsy, but giving great sign of strength. He was the son of a beautiful young lady, named Arlietta, of Falaise, who, after Duke Robert's death, married a noble knight, named Herluin de Conteville, by whom she had issue, Odon bishop of Bayeux, and Robert count of Mortain.

"Acknowledge," said Duke Robert to his assembled nobles, "acknowledge this youth for your duke, and place him at the head of the Norman chivalry."

The boy was accepted by acclamation, and his father, having first placed him under the guardianship of Henry, king of France, appointed Gislebert, earl of Brionne, tutor

Digitized by Google

to the young prince, and departed upon his pilgrimage, leaving Alain, duke of Brittany, regent.

The story of this famous pilgrimage enters not into my account; I did not go there; my conscience was free. I had harmed no man foully; I slew my enemies in fair fight: yes I did, God wot! plenty! Boy, had you but seen how horse and man staggered under a blow from my good mace! Those days are gone. Well, well! Let those who went to Palestine, tell what they saw there: how Duke Robert entered Constantinople, his mule shod with golden shoes, lightly nailed that they might fall off to enrich the scrambling multitude. How he found thousands of poor pilgrims refused admittance to Jerusalem, unless they paid a golden byzant each to the thrice-accursed infidel; and how Duke Robert swore by the heart of his belly! these men should enter, and kiss the Holy Sepulchre, or his byzants should fail; and he paid the tribute for them all. Let those, I say, who were there, if any be now alive, speak of these things; to me it suffices to say that the magnificent Duke Robert died on his journey back to Normandy. Peace be to his soul! William succeeded to the duchy.

I shall also pass over the great achievements in arms performed in Italy and Greece, by those brave Norman warriors led by Robert, surnamed Guiscard, and his brother Roger, who, in a sortie, when alone, and surrounded by enemies who had slain his horse, with one hand beat off his assailants, while with the other he took off the saddle from his dead steed, and carried it off in triumph! But these matters do not regard one who was not there, though he wielded a sword not less trenchant in the glorious fields of the Val de Dunes and Hastings,—perchance the French and Saxons are sterner knights than Italians and Saracens. Well! well! boy, let us go on.

Duke William was eight years old when he was placed on the throne of his fathers; and well did the glorious boy tread in the steps of his ancestor, the great Rollo, founder of the Norman dynasty. But at this moment what could a child do among those wild barons?

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IV.

Shows that the priests were in a stew,
And taught their neighbours what to do;
Swore that 'twas clearly time to bite, and
On the barons keep a tight hand.

THE moment Duke Robert was dead, the great barons, who had sworn fealty to the young Duke William, began to strengthen their castles, and sallied forth to ravage the country around, and replenish their provisions, that their strong places might be prepared to stand sieges. These provisions they took from the poor without giving remuneration; and they committed those excesses which the nobles of all countries usually do; for how can they otherwise maintain their state and dignity? God has decreed that there shall be poor and rich; and how can some be rich unless they take from the many poor? It is often distressing to see these ravages, but so nature has decreed that it should be, and the order of nobility must be maintained, boy Wace, or the bonds of society would be dissolved, and all thrown into confusion.

But there should be some order in such doings. The feudal chief should have his due from his feudatories; and they from their vavasours, and the vavasours from their franklins, as the Saxons call them; and these again, aided by their superiors, take from the land whatever the land can be made to produce by the labour of the lowest class, who, being naturally immoral, idle, and disobedient, must be compelled by wholesome coercion to cultivate the earth diligently; receiving, however, due food and raiment from their chiefs. No true knight would starve his serf, who has a right to food, lodging, clothing, and protection from his lord, in exchange for labour.

Here the translator cannot but notice the barbarism of

Digitized by Google

ancient times, where the good knight so amusingly talks of feeding, clothing, and lodging the labouring man! What a pity he did not live in our times, to learn that the poor ought to be "thrown upon their own resources;" that the rich need neither feed, nor clothe, nor lodge them, but "throw them upon their own resources!" that poor-rates encourage idleness, therefore it is right to refuse them, and force back the labourer "upon his own resources!" These admirable modern discoveries were first made by a political economist, called Harlequin, or Asslequin. He first tried the principle on his horse, which lived three days "upon its own resources." The story goes, that the poor beast got the gift of speech; for cruelty makes even animals remonstrate, and when the *talented* Asslequin was about to lock the door of his stable, said,—

"Master, you tell me to exert my energies, and you throw me upon my own resources! My resources are a set of good teeth, four stout legs, and a strong appetite; take off this collar, open the door, and you shall soon see how fat my own resources will make me, if there be any meadows within a hundred miles."

"Pooh!" said Harlequin, "you talk like an ass; there are meadows enough, but they belong to other people; you would not have me interfere with 'vested interests and the rights of property.' No, no! exert yourself; I throw you upon your own resources to live, as an honest, independent, industrious horse ought to live; and so good-bye till I want to ride you."—"Alas!" said the horse, "have I no right?" Harlequin locked the door. Three days after his horse was dead!

Now had Sir William Mallet been a poor-law commissioner, he would have known all this, and much more; he would have known how to ravage the country in a far cleverer way than the open one of lance in rest and sword in hand; he would have sat at his fireside, and put £2,000 a year into his pocket as a poor-law commissioner, without the discomfort of plate armour and desperate encounters; there would have been no need of sticking his sword through the body of the rebellious peasants—they would have died quietly, like Harlequin's horse, without distressing the tender-

Digitized by Google

hearted knight. He would have read in the newspapers—had such things existed, and that he could read—how a coroner's inquest had brought in a verdict of "Died by the visitation of God!" The pious knight would sigh, poke his fire, and after saying a Paternoster, exclaim,—

"God's will be done! The poor are dreadfully immoral; they have no industry, and require the spur to make them more honest and independent."

The great barons, continued Sir William, ravaged Normandy. They fought with each other; every species of assassination was daily practised; but the household of the young prince seemed to be the great object of their hostility. Guilbert, count of Eu, the duke's tutor, was stabbed by order of Raoul de Gacé, son of the bishop of Coutances. Therould, the governor of William, was next assassinated; Osbern, the intendant of his household, fell in a like manner; his throat was cut by William Montgomery when sleeping in the room with the prince. Montgomery was treated in like manner shortly afterwards by the friends of Osbern.

Among the numerous enemies of young Duke William was Roger de Toëni, his relation, and the standard-bearer of Normandy. Toëni had long fought against the Moors in Spain, and when he took any of the Saracens prisoners, he used to boil their flesh and eat it, making his other prisoners do the like; which caused the infidels greatly to dread him. It is true that great latitude is justly given to the conscience of a good Christian when dealing with infidels; and surely no wrong was it held in the eyes of God to boil the unbelievers, whether dead or alive. As a good Christian also, Sir Toëni might have made the Moorish captives eat of the repast, when other food was scarce, but there he should have stopped; it was unpardonable in a good knight of the Christian belief, himself to feed upon the flesh, however nutritive, of an unbelieving miscreant. "Holy Maria!" exclaimed Sir William, crossing himself repeatedly; "holy Maria! I would as lief have eaten a Jew."

Here the knight paused for a few moments, apparently in theological cogitation; but then continued:—

Doubtless it was so; food must have been exceedingly

Digitized by Google

scarce, and Sir Roger de Toëni, feeling his arm grow feeble to slay the enemies of the Cross, ate the Saracens upon an indulgence, that he might do stronger execution with his lance. And if such was his motive, as we all must hope, it ought highly to be applauded—God rest his soul! he was a brave man, but Roger de Beaumont was a better, and slew him in single combat.

Alain, duke of Brittany, who was regent of Normandy, vainly sought to put down the lawless barons, but was quickly poisoned. Such were the troubles of Normandy. The barons were strong in arms, but without that honour and justice which forms the mirror of knighthood. Beauty and riches were seized upon wherever force could get them; might was right, chivalry was gone, and even the holy altar was no longer a sanctuary.

The clergy seeing this, bestirred themselves to restore order, and a bishop declared that he had a letter direct from heaven to put an end to these crying outrages, that existed, not only in Normandy, but throughout France. In every diocese a council was assembled, and to these, all the barons, and even the people, were called in consultation. The clergy knew well that the oppressive barons were false and cruel, little caring for God or man, and therefore it was necessary to have the poor and suffering people on the side of what the clergy now called the "Peace of God!" By this means the people found leaders in the clergy, and protection in that religion which, though little cared for by these warlike barons, was outwardly respected. Fear of the Pope was before men's eyes!

The clergy, in return for their protection, received from the multitude physical strength, which held the barons in awe; for when the mass of the people act together from the pressure of great wrong, they are irresistible, breaking down sword and spear, though wielded by the best knights that ever shivered lances. At these councils, therefore, the clergy proclaimed the "Peace of God."

They opened registers everywhere, and in them were inscribed the crimes forbidden,—as if those who were deaf to the voice of God would obey the voice of man. Against all who travelled with arms, or committed violence, were curses

Digitized by Google

pronounced; nor was the high altar any longer to be a sanctuary for those who violated the "Peace of God."

The clergy fulminated anathemas with this formula: The deacon, having read the evangelist, ascended a platform before the altar, and with a loud voice, said—

"We excommunicate all knights of this diocese who do not observe, or shall hereafter cease to observe, the '*Peace of God*,' and the laws of justice, conformably to the orders of their bishop. Accursed be they! Accursed be their accomplices! Accursed be their arms! Accursed be their horses! They shall join the fratricide Cain, the traitor Judas, Dathan and Abiram, who were thrown alive into eternal flames. As these torches are extinguished before your eyes, let the joy of such knights be extinguished in the eyes of saints and angels, if before their deaths they fail to give satisfaction or to do penance according to the judgment of their bishop."

At these words all the bishops and all the priests, who held lighted tapers, turned them down and extinguished them against the earth, while all the people in fear of the Lord, and with trembling, cried out—

"May God thus extinguish and damn the souls of those who refuse to observe peace and justice."

Here the translator must observe how the priesthood enslaved the minds of the multitude by the appearance of religion. These cunning men saw that general depravity was gradually destroying all respect for religion, and feared that the armed barons would not long respect the riches accumulated by the clergy, which were only protected by the frail barrier of religious respect. They also saw, that as the bishops and other clergy were very active in all the debaucheries and robberies going on, the people were fast losing that reverence, the loss of which would be, to the priesthood, inevitable destruction.

The proclamation of the "Peace of God" at once gave, if not a remedy, at least a great check, to the danger into which the Church was falling; it recalled men to a sense of justice; it rallied around the priesthood all who were well disposed, and brought the suffering multitude at once over

Digitized by Google

to the side of the Church; thus rendering it more powerful than the barons and knights. But observe, that by the words, "*if* before their deaths they fail to give satisfaction, or to do penance according to the judgment of their bishop," &c., they were to be cast into eternal damnation. Observe, I say, that by these words, the heads of the clergy assumed the full power to pardon any atrocity. The naked interpretation, therefore, of the "Peace of God," as proclaimed by the Catholic Church, was this—

"We, the priesthood, seeing that you knights begin to rob the Church as well as the people, think to stop your proceedings. While you pillaged the poor and weak portion of the laity only, we understood each other, and all was very well between us; but you now most unjustly trench upon our share of the plunder. 'Honour among thieves,' gentlemen, is an old saying; and you shall find it will not turn to your account to break through that excellent rule. We therefore place ourselves at the head of the suffering and humbugged people, and will thus crush you, if you do not keep your plundering within due bounds.

"You may continue your lawless acts against the people, but it must be done with such cunning as not to unite them in a bond of resistance, nor to deprive the Church of due respect; and for every such act of oppression or cruelty, you shall go to hell, unless you pay us both money and respect for the ransom of your souls. If you are able and willing thus to satisfy us, you may do as you please, recollecting always that the lion's share belongs to the Church."

This was the secret of the "*Paix de Dieu*," and a very able stroke of policy it was. The knights saw the matter clearly enough, but dared not openly resist it; the mantle of religion enveloped the hypocritical priesthood; and as, in this instance, they appeared just and humane, the force of the suffering multitude was at their back; moreover, many bishops and minor clergy were hardy knights, who donned the armour of God or of man according to existing circumstances.

The brigand barons had been too open in their violence to expect the multitude would listen to them; hatred had

Digitized by Google

thrown the people more completely into the power of the priesthood; the baron was therefore obliged to go to work with caution.

How great the difference now! The days of deception have passed away! Printing enables men to register errors, causes, and remedies; the stereotype of truth fixes the attention of mankind. False opinions and false power are daily scaling away; sectarians, who with the hands of Briareus have long grasped power and riches, wither up, and as hypocrisy perishes, the religion of Christ emerges in all its purity, its majesty, and its mild splendour.

The knight's narrative continues:—

This measure of the Church did not at once produce all the fruit the clergy expected. Robbers are not so easily reformed by robbers; many portions of France refused to submit to the *Peace of God*, Normandy among the rest. Devastation continued, until a pest came and carried off numbers. This was attributed, no doubt most justly, to the divine wrath.

Sir William crossed himself.

The clergy made fresh efforts, and, ceding to the ferocity of the times, changed the *Peace of God* into the *Truce of God*, by which the Council of Caen, in 1042, decreed that God insisted that all crimes should cease upon Wednesday evening when the sun set; and when he rose on the Monday following, men might again join the devil in all suitable works for the enlargement of his dominions.

"No doubt," said the good knight, "this was right, as religion so ordained it; but I well remember, when I was very young—and by my troth, good youth, I did not like these doings—that one day we pillaged a village in Brittany, and slew many women and children. It was Wednesday, and being just before sunset, we had time, and God's leave, to do what seemed meet unto us all. Next day the country rallied against us, but it being prohibited to take vengeance, or commit any breach of the *Truce of God*, the people were withheld from attacking us, and we quietly rode away. Sinner that I am, I thought, though I was a beardless youth, it hard upon the enemy that he could not do battle

Digitized by Google

in vengeance; yet so God willed it, and it became us, as sons of the Church, to obey. Nevertheless, the shrieking of women always left a singing in my ears; and to cause the wailings of females seems greatly against the nature of a brave man."

Oh! those times were bad, but they passed away, at least from Normandy. As to the Saxon women, they are the lawful right of our good lances, and, though Christians, are not to be so tenderly considered as our Norman dames, whose lives are more valuable. Not that I would treat the Saxon women of rank as if they were Saracens. Heaven forbid! I would only hold them to sharp servitude, for they are very handsome, vain, and haughty, and due chastisement is wholesome for their immortal souls. Besides, they are strong, and of great service in all household labour; but they should be more beaten than pampered, as is fitting for slaves, who otherwise grow insolent and daring; and the Saxons have among them a common distich, Boy Wace, which is full of great wisdom, and should ever be recorded in the memory of the judicious:—

> "A woman, a spaniel, and a walnut-tree,
> The more they are beaten, the better they be."

Keep that in thy mind, good youth; and when thou takest to thee some fair maiden, hie thee to the wood and cut thee a good hazel stick, of wholesome dimensions, and place it carelessly in thy hall, but not near the fire, or thy wife may chance to burn it.

The "Truce of God" being thus established, it was greatly upheld by Duke William, who was now fifteen years old, and began to act for himself. This great man saw, at that early age, the advantage which the "Truce of God" gave, in controlling the power of his lawless barons, while it in no wise controlled himself, being, as he was, exempt from its provisions.

Such, then, was the state of Normandy when Duke William attained his fifteenth year; and now I shall close this sketch, and confine myself to the deeds and life of William the Conqueror.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER V.

DUKE WILLIAM THE SECOND, CALLED THE CONQUEROR.

He with fierce and mortal blows,
Defends his friends and slays his foes.

It was in the year of our Blessed Lord 1042, that I, then about twenty-six years of age, and returning from the village of Almagne, was riding gently towards Caen along the heights which form the right bank of the beautiful river Orne, when I heard the cries of men suddenly arise, as if engaged in combat. The large plains around the town of Caen enabled me to see to a great distance, but no body of men was in sight; however, I pulled down my visor, spurred my charger on towards the sound, and set my lance in the rest; for the cries were so close, that, though I saw no men, I distinctly heard the clash of arms ringing on the bucklers and cuirasses of those engaged. Before I proceeded far, the ground dipped abruptly, forming a hollow, in which two knights were fiercely beset by six armed men on foot. The horse of one had been slain, and his rider, covered by his shield, and with one knee on the ground, defended himself valiantly; while the other cavalier, having transfixed one of the assailants with his lance, had struck down a second just as I appeared. My first thought was to assist the kneeling knight; therefore, attacking the men who were upon him, I slew the first at a blow. My lance passed through his body and entered the carcass of the dead horse, but not liking to risk breaking the weapon by my endeavours to draw it forth from the dead caitiff and the horse, I left it in them, leaped from my saddle, and drawing my sword, ran upon the two remaining men who had pressed the fallen knight. "Curses alight upon thy Milan armour, Fitz Osborne," said the most powerful of the two, as he struck heavily upon the helmet of his antagonist, who fell stunned by the blow, although his

Digitized by Google

good casque remained without injury; and as the caitiff assailant said these words, he seized the fallen chevalier by the throat, with the intention to end the struggle by thrusting his sword's point under the gorget: that moment were Fitz Osborne's last, had not fortune sent me to the rescue.

"Such discourteousness," exclaimed I, "merits chastisement!" and I dashed the pommel of my sword against his visor, breaking in the bars thereof, with a strong crash of iron and teeth; the assassin rolled back senseless upon the ground. Then raising my good sword of Amiens steel, I struck the remaining man with a back blow upon the poll, and cutting through the laces of his helmet and the sinews of his neck, sent him unshrived into the other world.

While thus engaged, the other knight had shown no lack of either strength or courage; for having slain his three opponents, I found him raising his stunned companion from the earth.

"Fitz Osborne," said he, "are you badly hurt? speak, man."

"I fear he is slain," said I, unbuckling his helmet; but the air recovered him, to the great joy of his friend. We found, however, that his leg had been grievously injured by his horse falling upon him.

At this moment the armed man whose face I had battered in with the pommel of my weapon, attracted our attention by his groans; the blood gushed copiously from his bent and broken visor, and he seemed choking.

"By the heart of our Lady," said the unknown knight, "but I will see this knave's visage." "Not so plain as you might have done ten minutes agone, brave knight," replied I, "for methinks the beauty of his countenance is greatly damaged by the buffet I gave the joints of his visor; the day will be cold that makes his teeth ever chatter again." While I uttered these words, my new acquaintance, the knight, had, with no tender hand, torn off the knave's helmet.

"It is that scoundrel Avesgot, the son of William de Soreng," exclaimed the knight, "that traitor to all chivalry; and by the mass he shall die, but not by my hand. Grand merci, Avesgot, you are in good plight for the gallows, man;

Digitized by Google

and if Duke William have justice in him, the honest tree shall not be disappointed of its prey."

Fitz Osborne was now recovered; and I observed the speaking knight closely, for his great size attracted my attention.

His stature was far above mine, yet I was the tallest man in the town of Caen. He was at least seven feet high, his shoulders broad, his chest deep, his limbs straight and powerful. With the greatest ease he lifted up the wounded Avesgot, threw him across his saddle-bows, and then vaulted into his seat, as if he had not struck a blow that day.

"I wonder not at your prowess, valiant sir," said I, "for I count myself by no means deficient in skill and dexterity; but the ease with which you do such feats, together with your noble figure, argues you to be a man of extraordinary powers, and I crave your name."

"Sir," replied he, "I hope in God's good time to merit the land you so courteously bestow; but as yet I am a boy, and though I have seen some tilting in the harmless tournament, this has been my first serious adventure in arms, for I own but fifteen summers, and as yet need no barber."

"So honourable and courteous a gentleman speaks truth; and therefore," said I, "your age must be surely what you so modestly assert, but your bearing bespeaks sinews more knit than belongs to so green an age, and the blows this day struck would argue an experience in battle equal to the courage you have displayed. I have seen few knights deal better blows than my own. The arm of William Mallet has not been accounted among those that are soft and feeble."

"Oftentimes have I heard of the strength of Sir William Mallet, and great is my pleasure in meeting with so redoubted a warrior," said the youthful chevalier as he half-bowed, "and hope our acquaintance will be continued, for well have you seconded Fitz Osborne and myself this day; be pleased to be my guest, good Sir William Mallet, while we remain at Caen."

"That must not be, fair youth, for I am in my own town, to which you are a stranger; rather therefore, let me conduct you to my hotel, and, with Sir Fitz Osborne (for such appears

Digitized by Google

to be the name of this brave chevalier—if otherwise, I crave his pardon), be my guests while you sojourn in this city."

"Excuse me, Sir William," said my companion, "who had now loosed his helmet and taken it off, "perhaps, young as I am, you have seen me ere now." The knight had a stern and awful look for so young a man, though placid; the down was as yet upon his chin, his eye was bright yet fierce, and his face full and somewhat florid, his eyebrows arched and dark, his form so muscular and elastic that it seemed to play with his heavy armour, as if it were of no encumbrance or weight. I had nowhere seen him before.

"I crave pardon, noble youth," said I; "your carriage and courtly demeanour speak you to be of high lineage, but I have never before seen you, nor do I think you can have long honoured Caen with your fair company, though I have been some days away, and was returning when it fell to my good fortune to assist this excellent knight, Fitz Osborne."

"Know then, Sir William," said the knight, "that I am the duke of Normandy, and that I have been drawn to Caen on my tour through the provinces, which I am now resolved to rule as a sovereign; such villains as this groaning caitiff across my saddle-bow have too long destroyed the land, and I am here to collect about me knights like yourself, who will second my firm resolves. Therefore from this hour, Sir William, follow like a true vassal your liege lord and sovereign. He who aspires to rule his foes, must begin by ruling his friends; among whom I have now the right to rank Sir William Mallet."

I had, when the duke first made himself known, sprung from my horse and made a low obeisance, ungirded my sword, and, on his concluding words, I placed it in his hand.

"Noble Duke William, before you spoke, you were my liege lord, and, next to our Lord and Saviour, I was bound to obey your behests; but now that you have so honoured me, I place my sword in your hands. I have received my strength from God; I have received my knighthood from Sir Roger de Beaumont; but I will strike no blow till I receive the sword back which I now place in the hands of my prince!"

The young warrior's eye brightened at these words, for

Digitized by Google

my fame was strong, even then, among Norman chivalry; he looked fixedly in my face for a few moments, and then said:

"Sir William Mallet, take back your sword; use it in my service; and, if my will holds good, it will seldom lie idle in the scabbard. I am resolved to be master, and many strong barons surround me, who seem equally resolved that I shall not; the sword shall decide between us, and woe be to the conquered." As he spoke these words, his face assumed a look of severity that showed a man resolved to make his enemies pay dearly for their resistance. I remounted, and we rode forward. Avesgot groaned loudly, and begged in mercy to be allowed to walk, for his position was a very painful one, his head hanging down on one side, and his heels on the other. He bled much, and his armour hurt him grievously; his teeth were knocked out, his nose crushed, and all his features sorely vexed and fretted by the broken bars of his visor. But the duke held him strongly.

"No, caitiff," said he, "I have no inclination to give thee ease. I will hang thee before the sun sets, so thine agonies have not long to last. Comfort thyself as thou best can, for none shalt thou receive from William of Normandy, thy lord."

At this time we entered the gates of Caen.

"Here," said Duke William, to the officer of the guard at the gate of the Pont St. Pierre, "Gilbert Crespin, take this knave and hang him over the drawbridge of the Pont de Bayeux. I hear his bands are in that direction; they would like to see him."

The wounded man cried out as Duke William cast him rudely to the earth, and asked to see a priest before he died.

"All the priests in Caen could not shrive such a sinner; if any priest come near him," said the duke, "by the soul of my father, but I'll hang the shaveling up with his penitent. Away with him, and call the people to see the execution." He rode on amidst the shouts of the people, to whom the death of this knightly brigand was a sight almost inexplicable, so long had they been accustomed to suffer the greatest wrongs from the reckless Norman barons. The three sons

Digitized by Google

of Guillaume de Sorreng had become public robbers, and at the head of their free bands, infested all the roads of Normandy: one of them being on the present occasion ambushed in the deep caverns formed by the extraction of stones for the building of the city; and seeing the knights riding out to view the country, unaccompanied and unprepared for battle, had set upon them unawares, and slew Sir William Fitz Osborne's horse before the knight had time to draw his sword, or was aware of the attack; nor would the duke have escaped, but for the opportune arrival of Sir Mallet, added to his own extraordinary strength and agility. That evening Avesgot's body swung on the gates of Caen.

William continued some time in the city, and gave up his mind to the arrangement of his kingdom, placing the strong castle of this town in a complete state of defence; for the great military talents of his father having put all question of rebellion out of the barons' heads, many of the strong fortresses, and amongst others that of Caen, had fallen into decay.

Now I must take the reader to Flanders; and leaving the youthful hero playing the part of an experienced general, although burning with a desire to pursue those single-handed adventures as a knight-errant which his extraordinary prowess, romantic disposition, and great stature so peculiarly suited him to encounter—a desire greatly increased by the ease with which he had overthrown the three companions of Avesgot.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VI.

Matilda, full of grace and virtue,
I celebrate, to give her her due.

BALDWIN the Pious, earl of Flanders, at this time held his court at Ghent.

His daughter, the young and beautiful Matilda, was then fifteen, a brunette of that soft, rich, glowing brown which gives ripeness to beauty: she was rather below than above the middle stature; her features regular, her raven hair fell in two luxuriant plaits on either shoulder, according to the fashion of the time, and displayed a forehead, compact, prominent, and indicating the highest order of intellect; dark and nearly horizontal eyebrows, shaped with that wave which gives a beautiful, yet somewhat anxious expression to the black eyes beneath, liquid with the deepest passions of the soul in their highest refinement. Her nose might be called straight, and had that breadth of ridge which is conspicuous in some of the ancient statues; while her perfect mouth and pearly teeth displayed the beauty and firmness of her mind: it was a mouth and smile of fascination. Other loveliness bursts on the dazzled senses at once, but a beautiful mouth gains and wins upon the heart of man, till it becomes the idol of his worship; years cannot exhaust its ever-changing beauties; it is the index and epitome of all the varied feelings of our nature. Such was Matilda's.

Nor was her figure less attractive. With limbs cast in that mould which imparts strength to sylphic elegance, Matilda was all grace and lightness: when she danced, her feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth, but rather glanced along, as the white sea-fowl tips the wave with its wing, sweeping along the darkened ocean. Every look and movement told the energy of her mind; but the tenour of her character was gentleness, and a modesty shrinking from display. Accomplishments were to her of such easy attain-

Digitized by Google

ment that she surpassed all the females of Flanders. But accomplishments appeared subordinate to the higher views of a great perception earnestly bent upon the search after truth. Matilda was timid on ordinary occasions; yet when her courage awakened, it became daring and undaunted by perils, surpassing the fortitude of men.

Less striking at first accost, the rich beauties of Matilda formed a source of endless perfections, gradually discovering themselves to the observer. They were even as the living waters concealed within a gelid cavern—quiet and darkling in the rocky shade, but when the golden cup is dipped into the tranquil surface, they are drawn forth in all their brilliance, sparkling, transparent, pure, and exhaustless.

CHAPTER VII.

Rude knights to catch young maidens plot,
And tear them, screaming, off full trot;
Shrieking and scratching nought avails,
And scratching armour tears the nails.

BALDWIN V. had succeeded to his father, and in the intercourse which the events of those times had produced between the counts of Flanders and Normandy, the young Matilda and the son of Duke Robert had formed, in their childhood, an attachment which the steady characters of these two high-born personages had made more lasting than such infantile affections usually are.

Duke William, then but fifteen, had returned to Normandy while yet his youthful passion was in its full force; and his mind, deeply imbued with the highest feelings of chivalry, had given itself up to consider Matilda as the lady of his love to whom his lance was devoted. He had left her a pretty and gentle girl, but accounts of her ripened beauties were not wanting, and the celebrity of her charms was wide-spreading; nor was his rising fame unknown to the Brabantine damsel; but her natural constancy held firm the love which he had inspired in her heart.

Digitized by Google

At this time her father held his residence at Ghent. It was in a fine autumnal day in the month of November, and the beautiful Matilda was walking with her father in the gardens of his palace.

"Matilda," said he, "I should rejoice to see you made the spouse of Duke William, but our holy father the Pope has forbidden the union; it therefore must not be thought of any longer by me. Alas! the Pope has disappointed my best wishes."

Matilda's heart sank within her as these words were pronounced. She had never confessed her affection for the young duke; but the oftentimes expressed wishes of her father that their union should take place, powerfully strengthened in her breast the love she had so fondly cherished for her youthful companion, during the time that William resided at the court of Flanders, three years before. Her sound sense had seen the superiority of his talents, and it required less acuteness than that with which she was gifted, to perceive that in ability, valour, and beauty he exceeded all other young men at her father's court. The cruelty of his disposition had not then made itself manifest, and it may be doubted whether those savage deeds which it must be confessed he committed in after-life, might not have been produced by the state of society in those times, rather than have originated in any inherent disposition to shed blood. I have ever seen him disposed to generosity rather than to cruelty, unless irritated to fierceness by opposition: this he would not endure, and without this terrible fierceness he could not have ruled Normandy, nor tranquillized her at the time as he did.

Matilda, prudent, reserved, modest, but full of passion and romance, would have nevertheless conquered her natural feelings, in compliance with the wise custom adopted by all sensible people of high rank, of strengthening their power by alliances. Matilda, I say, could have forgotten William had she been called upon so to do; but this was not the case. Her father's political interests and his own wishes were avowedly in favour of the Norman; and the dictates of her natural feelings were up to this time supported by the soundest political reasoning, and by parental wishes.

Digitized by Google

Matilda, therefore, cherished her affection for William in the inmost recesses of her heart; while his proposals for their union sufficiently indicated the truth and firmness of his often-expressed passion.

It was then with bitter feelings of wounded affection and insulted reason, that she heard of the Pontiff's negative, without his offering any argument in support of a refusal so inconsistent, as she thought, with common sense; for the young and beauteous Matilda, as innocent and pure in heart as she was lovely in person, could form no idea of those high motives which ever directed the Holy Father of our Church, whose perfect purity and goodness saw clearly that as her father was at war with the emperor of Germany (whose interests his Holiness then favoured), it would by no means add to the advantage of Christendom to strengthen the earl by a union with Normandy. His highness, intrusted with the keys of heaven, felt his conscience implicated, for how could the highest earthly functionary, the link, as it may be called, between heaven and earth, sacrifice the temporary welfare of the Popedom to the love-sick feeling of a girl?

Besides, to strengthen the earl of Flanders would be to prolong war. This was contrary to the Pope's conscience. To keep the peace among men, was the immediate calling of his high office!

But our Holy Father would not promulgate a falsehood; and it has been a thousand times averred by the enemies of the holy see of Rome, that Pope Leo IX., in his excommunication of Duke William, asserted that his marriage with Matilda was unholy, they being within the limits of consanguinity forbidden by the Church. This assertion is untrue. There was no relationship of any kind between William and Matilda, and the holy head of our religion never said that there was. His excommunication was solely a matter of politics, and worthy of a great prince who made his spiritual power tend to the advantage of his temporal interests, as all great monarchs ought to do. In truth his highness was greatly to be lauded; for surely the foundation of the pontifical power is in his temporal power. Heaven is his canopy, his roof; and what man of sense would neglect

Digitized by Google

the foundation of his house? No, boy, the Pope could only look to the foundation, and leave the spiritual matters to the will of God.

But it was natural that the maiden should be unable to penetrate the depths of papal policy; nor indeed ought the laity to search too deeply into the mysteries of the court of Rome. We should bow to all its behests without thought, resistance, or inquiry. They partake both of heaven and earth. Of the latter, great princes can judge in ordinary cases; but a higher authority dictates to his Holiness; and his decision, being from heaven, must therefore be final.

The sad Matilda sighed deeply therefore, when her father spoke thus; and it seemed that all earthly happiness had fled.

"But," added the earl, "I must strengthen my power against the emperor by some high alliance, for I cannot allow you to enter a convent."

If Matilda was sorrowful before, these words were far from consoling her, and seemed to freeze her blood.

"Oh, my father," said she, "force me not to marry! let me remain as I am; let me be ever with you, or let me take the veil! I am unhappy, and make me not a mourning bride, unless you allow me to become the bride of our Lord Jesus, and devote myself to his worship for ever."

"Not so," said her father, looking sternly in her face, "not so, my child; the power and welfare of Flanders must be first in the mind of Earl Baldwin's daughter. But I will allow some months to pass," added he, softened by the paleness which overspread her face, "ere I speak of this again; and in that time I hope my noble Matilda will feel equal to execute, with becoming dignity, that which her father commands and the good of the country calls for."

At this moment the thought of Geoffrey Martel, count of Anjou, presented itself to the mind of the terrified virgin. He was a potent chief, whose power would be of no small service in the war against the emperor of Germany; he had long sought the hand of Matilda, whose father had always refused him, in the strong hope of uniting her to the duke of Normandy, which would have been a more powerful alliance.

Digitized by Google

The count of Anjou was a cruel and bad man, but a knight of such extraordinary force that few could encounter him singly, either at a tournament or in mortal combat. Matilda's father guessed at the feelings which so deeply agitated his daughter, and promised that he would never join her hand to that of Geoffrey Martel. She threw herself on her knees at Count Baldwin's feet, and gave vent to her gratitude.

"Mother of God be praised! and you, my ever dear and honoured father, thanks, a thousand thanks for your goodness! Give me time, my dear father, and I will try to overcome my unhappy attachment to Duke William, and submit myself to your will in all things. But as to the lord of Anjou—oh, holy Virgin! protect me from that detested mortal, whom I dread."

"Be comforted, my dear child," said the earl, "and fear him not: methinks the earl of Flanders can protect his daughter." As he said these words, they turned—and the count of Anjou stood before them!

The good earl was a bold man; but he started at this sudden apparition, so close upon the words he had just uttered. Matilda almost sunk under her terror, and had just strength to make a low obeisance to the unwelcome visitor.

"Earl," said Geoffrey Martel, "I sought not to acquaint myself with your secrets; but your words were heard! I come here once more to ask the hand of the Lady Matilda. I ask not her heart: after what has passed, that is not to be expected. Her person and your alliance are all I desire. She may give the rest to whom she pleases. Geoffrey of Anjou is not a man to care much for the whining of a pale-faced sentimental girl! You know my territory and my power: peace or war are before you, As your son-in-law, I join your standard at the head of a strong body of garnished lances—rejected, their points are at once opposed to you,—and even the lord of Flanders may dread them."

As he said this, his ferocious visage gleamed a look of defiance upon the earl; and folding his strong arms across his full and broad chest, he seemed to await the decision, as if he was glad to wreak his rage upon the devoted Matilda, at

Digitized by Google

whom he looked with a fiendish smile, as upon his certain prey. For if her father accepted the offer, she was his victim; if he rejected the proposal, the count knew what pain she would feel at seeing her father involved in war by her means: moreover he had resolved upon a dreadful act, which would put both herself and the earl in his power.

Baldwin, earl of Flanders, had his faults, but want of courage and of affection for his daughter were not among them. The insolence of the count called both his manhood and his tenderness into action. The last words of this intruder, and still more his sinister look as he gazed on the charms of Matilda, excited her terror beyond all power of concealment: she trembled with anger and with horror. Her father saw the convulsive motion of her upper lip, which he well knew expressed a great internal struggle, and his wrath broke through the bounds of that heavy and stagnant feeling peculiar to the Flemings.

"Sir count!" cried he fiercely, "you are in my house, and no injury shall your person receive, though your insolence merits a just and severe chastisement. My daughter shall never be the bride of a lawless and uncourteous knight! Go forth sir count, leave my territory, and if ever you again set foot on Flemish ground be it as an enemy." Saying this, the earl blew a silver whistle attached to his breast, and his esquire appeared.

"Order the attendants of the count of Anjou to wait upon their master, who departs without the stirrup-cup," said he, in loud and angry tones, sternly looking at Geoffrey Martel, who had come prepared to meet the storm he had resolved to raise.

"Earl Baldwin, I heed your wrath as little as I do that of the Lady Matilda; both of you shall repent of your insolence. I am too well accompanied to dread your threats, or your breach of hospitality: as to you, lady," said he, bowing, "I will say more at our next meeting; till then I commend my suit to your better reflection; Geoffrey of Anjou is not a man to be foiled by maidens or dotards."

Saying these words, he strode through the hall of the house; and as he crossed the threshold, he sounded on his horn a note of defiance, vaulted into his saddle, and taking

Digitized by Google

his lance and shield from his esquire, departed at full speed, followed by a train of twelve knights who had accompanied him in complete armour.

"By the mass!" said the count, as he spurred his charger over the drawbridge, "I will be avenged upon the earl of Flanders and his lovesick daughter. Would that her paramour, the young Norman, might fall in my way, and by the powers of darkness he should bite the dust, were it only to vex the girl; but she shall suffer for her insolence." Having galloped clear of bow-shot from the walls of Ghent, upon the road towards Bruges, he drew up, and walking his horse slowly along, seemingly buried in thought, he suddenly called his trusty squire:—

"Pecquigny, do you think my vassals bold enough to do their seigneur's bidding in a daring deed, if he leads them himself?"

"We have always been well rewarded," said the squire, "and why should we not follow you now? In all your deeds, sir count, neither our courage nor our consciences have failed, and you know that both have been pretty sharply tried in some of these your wayward enterprises out of your own territories. That old man and woman that you made us hang on a tree, for following you into the wood after their daughter, was rather sharp work for some of your followers; for myself, I would as soon strangle an old man as a young man, but I think some of those galliards did not altogether like the old hag's shrieks, as we were tying the rope round her scraggy old throat; nor would I advise you to try their temper too far again."

"Curse their chicken hearts, the varlets! I hate such fellows. I like men who, when cased in good iron coats, are softer without than within! By the way, have you rid me of that damsel?" added the knight in an under-voice.

"Yes, by my faith, and with a clear conscience, too; for I made her take herself off, and far enough."

"What! did she kill herself?"

"No, no; but that wild blade Giles Amalric had a whim to join Robert Guiscard in Italy; so I told him of the girl's state of distraction, that you were heartily sick of her whining, and if he would persuade her he was in love with

Digitized by Google

her, and go shrewdly to work, he might carry her off from the round tower with a ladder of cords; and I added, he should have a large sum to take him to Italy if she went with him; if not, why he had only to take care we never heard more of her, let him settle that matter as he and his conscience pleased. 'There are plenty of ponds and trees between this and Milan,' said I, 'if you grow tired of your companion or yourself, so you may hang which you like, and choose your death; many a better man would willingly do so, when the count has set him on a brasier of live coals.'

Then, to encourage the damsel, I gave her hopes of ruder treatment than she had yet got; which was rough enough in all conscience. So she took the bait, and from pretending to make love to her I think Amalric became really so. However, be that as it may, he promised to take her off, and they fairly started last night out of the window of the round tower by a rope ladder, crossed the ditch in a skiff that I took care should be at the foot of the tower, and ere this I dare say they are far enough. I made the young fellow safe, by making him sign a bond to forfeit all he possesses in case of the girl ever being heard of in this country; at least he thought it was a bond of this nature; but when all was finished, I let him into the secret, that it was a confession that he had murdered her father and mother, whom we hanged in the forest. My young jackanapes looked rather blank when I told him the trick I had played him. 'Young man, take off the damsel,' quoth I; 'it is your fault if she ever returns, and if she does not, you are safe.'"

"By the mass! Pecquigny, but you are an adroit knave," said the knight, "I never before got rid of so troublesome a wench with so little difficulty."

"Ay," said Pecquigny, "and the best of it is, that she thinks you are outrageous at her escape, and will pursue her; so that she will never put her nose into this part of the world again."

"But now," said Martel, "for the matter in hand. You know the Lady Matilda has rejected my alliance, and her father added insult to this fond compliance with his daughter's love for William of Normandy; a union that can

Digitized by Google

never take place, unless they bribe the old Pope. However, William may have her and welcome, if he can; but I mean to thwart them all, and have her by force. You know, Pecquigny, that she often rides forth with the earl well attended, and sometimes without him,—you understand me? Are these knights of mine bold enough to stand their ground, and hold the escort in check, while I carry the maiden off, assisted by Henriot and Denis, to the Devil's Hole? where I can conceal her and school her into compliance with my wishes, and from which she shall never depart till she is mine.

"If I take her to one of my own castles in Anjou I shall be besieged, and the French king will interfere; but if I hold her close prisoner in the Devil's Hole, none can prove that I have her, unless she comes out as my wife; and even then, her father shall pay her full dowry ere he sees her, or learns where she is detained. In that hell upon earth, the Devil's Hole in Cambray, none will ever find her, or think even of seeking for her there."

"By the tail of the devil, sir knight, but your scheme pleases me; let your knights, who care for neither God nor devil, unless in the shape of gold or silver, remain ignorant of where the lady is to be confined; and next let us keep these galliards for a while in the castle. As for their courage, promise them good largess and they will fight Satan himself."

The knight and his squire thus rode on at some distance before their companions.

"Marley," said one of them to his neighbour, "there goes a pair of knaves plotting some damnable mischief."

"Bauderic," said Marley, "they will hear you."

"Pooh, man! they are out of ear-shot, and my voice is soft, you know."

"Yes, by the mass! as soft as your heart, Bauderic, when you pulled the old man's legs that we hanged the other day in the wood."

"Well, Marley," retorted the other, "and if I did, it was only to put him out of pain; you don't suppose he took pleasure in hanging, do you?"

"Well, well, man—I won't quarrel with you for your

Digitized by Google

good nature, it's so small a matter to dispute upon, that we might soon lose the gist of the argument; but what think you these men are plotting? Our chief seems very eager—I hope it is something worth fighting for. I am as poor as a rat; and if he don't put a few byzants in my pouch, I will go to Italy and serve Robert Guiscard."

"So will more of us," said a third of these adventurers, who were all of them ruined men, and serving any chief for pay.

"I am tired," continued the fourth, "of doing Geoffrey Martel's work; there is more danger than honour or gain in it."

"Honour!" said Marley; "When did you carry your thoughts such a long journey out of your road, as to think of that? You meant gain, man, and tacked honour to it, as a girl does a flounce to her petticoat when she has thick ankles."

"Well, Marley, I don't pretend to more than my comrades, and I am sure that's being modest enough in your company; but a man may get a priest to shrive him on a Sunday, and so go to work all clean on a Monday morning."

"A priest shrive you of your sins, Bauderic! Grand mercy, man! no natural life would be long enough to hear the half of them."

"Unless the priest confessed him wholesale," said the third companion, "and absolved him from the seven deadly sins in a lump, multiplied by his age, with all the minor peccadilloes paid for weekly by the thousand."

"Come," said Marley, "don't let us talk of shriving, it puts people in mind of the gallows, and gives half of the company a crick in the neck; so close up to our leaders, and let us hear what we are to do to-morrow." So saying, they put their horses to a trot and proceeded on their journey, where I shall now leave them, and follow the movements of the duke of Normandy.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VIII.

He none allows his will to gainsay,
Feeling that fierceness was his mainstay.
Barons and priests a traitor crown,
But by a wise fool are o'erthrown.

We left William busily employed in restoring the fortifications of Caen, and vigorously purifying the channels of justice, which had been so long choked by the foul deeds of the feudal chiefs.

The town of Caen was at that time, as it now is, surrounded by a strong wall flanked with round towers, within which stood the castle on a height, touching the walls and commanding the town. The drawbridge of this castle is covered by four strong round towers, forming a small but formidable barbican. The moats, or ditches, are wide and deep, and the waters of the Orne flow into those moats on the lower ground. The tower is therefore altogether strong.

The palace which William inhabited was then in the centre of the citadel, for that which now ornaments the town was built after our return from the conquest of England.

The duke's residence in the citadel was strong, yet not very large; the materials, as you know, have been since used for building his magnificent palace in the suburb, close to the church of St. Etienne. But in the château there was a large saloon of arms, in which the warriors waited to receive the commands of their young chief.

On a certain day, after having arranged the affairs of the city, the duke of Normandy assembled in his hall the chief citizens of Caen. He sat upon a throne at the end of this spacious and vaulted apartment; his men-at-arms and military companions stood on each side in complete armour; so was the duke himself, and the rest of the high-roofed armory was filled with anxious citizens.

For some time he remained thoughtful, his elbows resting

Digitized by Google

upon his knees, and his face concealed between his hands; he was helmed and gauntleted, his good sword girded on his thigh, and he was ready to mount his horse. All were silent, as their eyes watched their young sovereign, who slowly raised his head, looked sternly at the assembly, and then, suddenly standing up on the elevated dais, a giant towering above the assembly, he seemed marked by nature for command.

After a short pause, with a loud voice he addressed his friend :—

"Fitz Osborne, I shall now proceed on my journey through the country, and, in the presence of the citizens of Caen, I leave you master of the government here till the castle be made strong: place a fair garrison to guard the donjon, then appoint Barnou de Glôzz governor of the town, and meet me at Rouen. I exhort the citizens to keep good watch and ward, hard by the gates, so that no traitor surprise our town of Caen; for traitors are abroad, and what is worse, there are traitors here! ay, in my government—traitors, even in my palace! But I know them, and their blood be on their heads! Heads!" said he, raising his terrible voice of thunder till the hall shook, and the assembly made a general start, "heads, that by the splendour of God shall roll upon the earth, a warning and a terror to the foes of William."

After uttering these words, he looked for a moment fiercely around, then, changing his aspect, in a milder tone added :—

"And now, my friends, adieu; be faithful, confident, and brave—adieu!"

As he descended from the dais the assembly opened, all bowing lowly and reverently, to the young but huge warrior striding through the hall. Then, attended by his men-at-arms, he proceeded to Valonges, for the purpose of asserting the integrity of his government along the coast.

But the young statesman had yet to learn that powerful vassals are not so easily managed. The sequel will show this, and will also show how his genius expanded with the difficulties he had to encounter, mastering all. Among the most dangerous of his foes were his cousins Guy de Bur-

Digitized by Google

gundy, earl of Brionne; Grimult de Plessis; the bishop of Bayeux; and the viscount of Cotentin. These barons had assembled at Bayeux, and it is now time to attend to their traitorous proceedings.

The episcopal palace of Bayeux was a magnificent building; it consisted of a quadrangle, in which the followers of this powerful ecclesiastic congregated. In that quadrangle you might see, assembling in small groups, knights and men-at-arms, bowmen of the guard, priests, cowled monks, beggars, and stout peasants bearing petitions, appealing against injustice, or gaining, by a secret bribe, the aid of clerical power in some outrageous cause. There, too, were seen parents seeking their dishonoured children, or desperately braving destruction, and taunting the abandoned priests, whose conduct was a profanation of their creed; for there did painted hell affect the hue of heaven, seeking with smiles to hide her rottenness. The neighing and pawings of noble steeds, harnessed in warlike trappings, added their eager and impatient spirits to the stirring scene. Here the patient mule and ever ill-treated ass stood calm and motionless under heavy loads. There their drivers, scarcely less patient, sat eating their meal of bread and garlic, waiting for their masters.

Such was the scene which generally animated the courtyard of the bishop's palace at Bayeux; a huge archway formed the entrance, and in that part of the pile which faced the archway as you entered, was the portion of the building inhabited by the prelate. It had, like heaven, "*many chambers*," but they were not the habitations of the righteous. Oh, no—they were chambers where the lurid glimmer of the dark lantern for a while shed its red and fitful gleam, guiding guilt to its trembling victim; and when the struggles of innocence were over, all was again dark—too dark for blood to meet the eye, too deep for shrieks to reach the ear! Long corridors, and hidden passages, with secret apartments opening with springs, unknown except to the dignitaries of the palace, led to these subterranean sepulchres of the living! All above appeared to serve the Creator, all below was devoted to the fiend—even as a bad heart beats in a beauteous bosom!

Digitized by Google

Before the cross stood the altar; before the altar stood the bishop and his satellites; and before these stood the ignorant and the poor, and the pious, who to those hypocritical priests bent the knee, as to mediators between God and man. And while the false ministers of religion there stood and viewed the prostrate and bigoted multitude, they marked the beautiful and the brave for their victims; the profound vaults received them, their supplications and their cries were unheard by the busy population above; few knew their fate, and it was sacrilege to inquire. They were perhaps last seen near the palace, ay, but who dare accuse the warlike prelate—still less the minions of his pleasures? These were mysterious matters, over which the graceful drapery of religion was cast; and woe to the profane hand that presumed to draw aside the hallowed curtain.

In the midst of this part of the palace there was, as usual, a vast hall of audience; and this opened to a smaller, but still a capacious chamber, where the prelate held his councils. Into this none entered uninvited but the fool Gallet, who, according to the custom of the times, was privileged.

"Mort de ma vie!" exclaimed Nigel, or Neel, earl of Coutances, as he entered into this latter chamber, "mort de ma vie! but this young galliard rides the high horse with a vengeance! It is time for him to learn that although his father won power by arms, there is no reason why the son should keep it with his unfledged sword, and treat us all as if his word was law. What say you, sirs?" continued he, turning to Guy of Burgundy and Grimult de Plessis, who had, with Nigel, followed the bishop, and entered at the same door.

"I know not what to say," replied Guy abruptly, "but I well know what to think, however. William and I have long been companions; and besides honouring me with the order of knighthood under the walls of Arques, he has given me the earldoms of Brionne and Vernon; thus the struggle between friendship and other feelings is strong, and I would fain not speak of these matters."

When the young man uttered these words, the bishop suddenly stopped, and, turning to the speaker, wrapped his rich episcopal robes around him, saying, with a mild look and gentle voice—

Digitized by Google

"My son, thou art right; let the kindness, I may rather say the weakness of nature speak—crush it not in thy bosom; but yet be careful that justice be not smothered. Tell me, my son, wast thou not varlet to Duke William, and were you not knighted by him for good and gallant service done beneath the walls of Arques?"

"He saved the life of William," said Grimult de Plessis, abruptly.

"Then," continued the bishop, "inasmuch as fair reward followed fair service, the varlet and his lord were quits. Art thou not, good earl, legitimate heir to the ducal throne of Normandy, in right of thy blessed mother Adela, daughter of Richard II., fourth duke of Normandy?"

"It is even so," said Guy mournfully; "had William not seen the light, I should have been heir to the dukedom."

"Then it appears," continued the bishop, "that the bastard stands between thee and thy rights?"

Guy of Burgundy loosed the straps of his helmet and moved towards the casement, against which he rested in a gloomy mood without answering.

"Be not downcast, good youth," continued the bishop, following him, "nay, fret thee not, my son! let not thy proud spirit chafe. Far be it from me to raise feelings in thy bosom that may be hostile to thy friendship with Duke William, irksome to thyself; but our holy religion demands at my hands that I should defend with my feeble voice that which is right and just. Now, without wishing ill to Duke William, if duke he may justly be called, but which I, in my sacerdotal capacity, am forced to doubt, I may safely say, and without offence to thy kindly feelings towards the bastard, that the slight gift of a small portion of Normandy to one who, in right of blood and lawful marriage, claims the whole, is no such mighty favour as to require that thou shouldst forget thy rank and waive thy dignity. The majority of the Normans behold in thee their feudal lord; and it were not well to see the false feelings of imaginary gratitude supersede the duties of a rightful chief towards a multitude of faithful vassals. Thou canst not, my lord, undo thy birth—duke of Normandy thou art by right, and all thy kindly feelings towards William cannot change the birth of either.

Digitized by Google

"His father, thy very glorious uncle, Duke Robert the Magnificent, peace be to his soul (here the bishop looked upwards and crossed himself devoutly), came strangely to his brother Richard's throne. Robert rebelled against his brother Richard, who nevertheless, having subdued, pardoned and received him to his bosom. That kind brother, with many of his friends, died suddenly by poison, after a banquet given by his conquered and pardoned brother, Duke Robert.

"Of that horrible murder Duke Robert was—it may have been unjustly—accused by the general voice of Normandy; and though doubtless Duke Robert had no hand in the dreadful deed, yet his conscience was, as men said, sore troubled, and he went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, for some unknown deed which pressed heavily on his soul.

"But before he left Normandy, he, in the full exercise of power, forced his vassal barons, sore against their conscience, to promise fealty to young William, his natural son by dame Arlietta of Falaise, in preference to the infant son of his murdered brother, the good Duke Richard, of blessed memory. Richard left a son, Nicholas, now Abbé of St. Ouen, who, also a bastard, was set aside from his inheritance on that account by Duke Robert his uncle; who, nevertheless, having most justly devoted the child to the holy Church and service of God, most unjustly forced his barons to swear fealty to his own natural son William.

"Now all men see that either the Abbé of St. Ouen is heir to the dukedom of Normandy, or William is not heir. Is the right of succession to be in the legitimate heirs, or is it not? If it be, you are the real true and loyal heir to the ducal coronet. If it be not, then, I say, that Nicholas is the true duke of Normandy.

"But there are men, and I, unworthy as I am, a sinner, confess myself of their opinion, who hold that the dukedom of Normandy is elective by the free will of its barons. Those who swore fealty to young William were forced to do so by the dread of good Duke Robert—*requiescat in pace.* But they have at his death (and before he died this elective franchise could not be exercised) elected thee to be the true and lawful heir, both by the legitimacy of thy de-

Digitized by Google

scent, and the voice of the barons. Wilt thou, then, most noble duke of Normandy, falsify thy birth, and abandon thy vassals and thy throne, because William, the son of Arlietta, preferred by his father to Nicholas, son of Adela, has bestowed upon thee the honour of knighthood, instead of himself receiving that honour from thy hand; and because he has graciously bestowed upon thee the lordship of Brionne in exchange for the dukedom of Normandy? And art thou, most excellent youth, so blinded by the favours of thy rightful vassal, William of Falaise, as not to see that he gives to thee the lordship of Brionne and Vernon, not from love but from fear, to keep thee quiet till *supper-time;* a meal which, as it was so to his father, may be propitious to the high fortunes and temper of the son?"

The bishop paused—his small and brilliant, but deep-sunk watchet eyes were fixed with intense interest upon the face of Earl Guy, in whom the contest between honour and the conviction of his right, just proven by the sophistry of the subdolous bishop, seemed not long or violent.

"Does Earl Guy of Burgundy imagine," said Nigel, "that I, the husband of Duke Robert's sister, would point my lance against his son, if the youth was justly entitled to the throne? Have not fifty battles, fought in his father's cause, proved that I am true to the blood of Roland, when sanctioned by just claims? When the terrible Talvas fell, pierced by my stronger arm, in the forest of Blavon, was not my fealty proved? When, aided by the men of Coutances, and the danger being so great that the very women fought against the English invaders, were not those invaders defeated with horrible havoc on the banks of the river Sare, and was not the loyalty of Neel then conspicuous? When side by side and lance by lance, Alfred the Giant and myself overthrew a host of Bretons, and their noble duke, Alain, on the borders of the river Coisnon, was not, in that hot day, Neel of Coutances proved true and faithful to his liege lord and brother, the duke of Normandy? But, above all, was not the strong and important fortress of Tillières defended and saved by this good arm? Under its walls, did I not fight with and overthrow Eudes, earl of Chartres?—and by whom was this stronghold given to Henri, king of France? By

Digitized by Google

this boy William! who twice called out to the brave knight Guilbert de Crespon, to whose faith and prowess the sage Duke Robert had intrusted this great fortress, 'Sir Guilbert de Crespon! on your faith to our king, Lord Henri of France, open the gate, or refuse at your peril.' Are the glories of Duke Robert and the strength of Normandy, the fruits of many a bloody fight, thus to wither in the feeble grasp of this child! Holy Virgin, but it shall not be, while Neel of Coutances can sit on his warhorse in armour!"

"Your hand, most noble chevalier," said Guy, "I am ready! all foolish weakness is gone, and I am ready to do the deed."

"Then let us be prompt," said Grimult du Plessis; "for in these matters time is precious."

A gleam of joy sparkled in the eyes of the crafty bishop, who remarked drily—

"William is now at Valognes, and your retainers are strong in that town; he has but a small retinue; and if alarm be given, he will maintain his ground in the town till succour arrives."

"The peninsula is easily guarded, and he can't escape," said Guy of Burgundy.

"Unless he be succoured," observed the bishop, "as he will assuredly be; or unless he escape alone, as he possibly may."

"What better mode does our reverend conspirator propose?" said Neel, with a stern look.

"My good sir knight," quoth the prelate, "it is not for me, a churchman, to speak in presence of the flower of Norman chivalry, and to say how an enemy may be surprised; but this I know full well, brave knights, that if you let William escape, your hours are numbered. However, take ye heed, and counsel as ye think meet; mind not a gownsman like me, but do that which seemeth good in your high judgments. Perhaps 'twere best, good sirs, to let the question drop, though our secret meeting can now hardly be long concealed, and William may invite us all to sup with him, as his father did your noble uncle, Duke Richard! What sayest thou, Sir Guy?"

Digitized by Google

Here the bishop crossed himself, and casting his eyes to heaven for a moment, continued—

"I would scarce like to accept his hospitality. I know his father did not play Duke Richard foul; but then, good sirs, dukes have those among their varlets that are quick to do that which would be better left unmentioned. Beware, good knights—beware of what you are about! While William lives, ye are likely to die."

The conspirators looked at each other, and the dark advice seemed to meet no dissent; when suddenly they were startled by a huge and shaggy-looking human figure, which springing up from a corner, where it had been squatting low, and therefore unseen, leaped close to the bishop, exclaiming as it seized the mitre from his head and replaced it by its own fool's cap,—

"*Diable!* but the bishop speaks what is good. Grand mercy, but a mitre cures folly; and now, bishop, who is the fool—the bishop of Bayeux, or Gallet, the poor fool of Bayeux?" Then he grinned hideously with a distorted countenance, in the face of the terrified dignitary, who was frightened rather by the emotion of his conscience, and the sudden exchange made in his head-gear, than by the sight of his own fool, Gallet, of whose harmless character he was well aware. He therefore quickly recovered his self-possession, and prevented the attack of his companions, who were alarmed at this interruption, and would have killed the fool on the spot, if they had not been prevented by the ecclesiastic.

"Stop, sirs," said the bishop, "harm him not, all is safe; he is incapable of comprehending what he hears, and were you to harm him, we should be suspected. Moreover, he is a wretch of extraordinary strength, and wields the heavy club you see at his side with such dexterity and power, that to slay him would be no easy matter, and his cries would draw the populace upon us, to our great disparagement. I beseech you then to sheath your daggers—we have need of them for a nobler victim."

"By the mass, but the bishop is a wise fool! the people say miracles come from the Church, and a bishop with a cap and bells talks as wisely as a fool in a mitre! I'll have

Digitized by Google

my own again, bishop; give me my cap, good bishop, and take your mitre," said Gallet, in a melancholy tone, as he gave the bishop his mitre and squatted in his corner silently, as before.

"We must chase your fool hence, my lord, ere we proceed in our consultation," said Neel.

"He heeds nothing, and understands nothing, being a perfect idiot. Good sir knight, fear him not," replied the churchman; and then turning his back to the poor fool, he continued:—

"He is very obstinate too, and we should have trouble to get rid of him; let us not heed him, but proceed to business. Knights, are your hearts resolved? You boldly drew your daggers upon this poor wretch, are they as ready for another? William sleeps at Valognes this night, slenderly guarded, dare you strike, or do you tremble?"

"Not I," said Grimult, "I for one will strike boldly and home; we have five hundred men-at-arms; we shall surround him sleeping, and the deed will be quickly done."

"We are all agreed," said the others; "let us arrange our departure and be off within an hour; we shall soon reach Valognes, and crush our cock at once."

"Ah, ha!" said the fool starting up and flourishing his club, "and I'll crush my cock that never let me sleep this morning;—cock-a-doodle-doo!" screamed he, as he rushed out of the room.

"He has vowed vengeance against that cock for some time," said the bishop, laughing; "and I hope we shall be as decided with ours as he will with his enemy. But come, sirs, and let no delays impede our resolves. I will change my robes for my harness of war, and be with you in half an hour."

Saying this, the worthy dignitary of mother church quitted the apartment, followed by the rest of the traitors, to hasten towards their victim.

On leaving the apartment in the palace, Gallet took the direction towards Valognes, marching with extraordinary rapidity, but unnoticed, as it was his common practice to run along the streets with the usual strange antics of an idiot.

Digitized by Google

"By the mass, I have changed caps with the bishop to some purpose!" said the poor fool, speaking to himself as he ran along. "Uncle William always gives me clothes when I am cold, and now they are going to kill him; but I will tell him; the bishop's cap gave me sense enough for that. I don't like the bishop, and uncle William will pay him for this!"

We shall now leave our good duke exposed to the attempts of these traitors, and take a view of the state of England at that period, of which I had great cognizance, having then lately returned from a journey to the court of the Anglo-Saxon king, which I had visited for the purpose of proving chivalrous adventures worthy of a knight's lance, and fit to gain due favour in the sight of the fair Agatha, heiress of Louvigny, my present lady, whom God long preserve, if such be his holy will!

The knight crossed himself; and Robert Wace says, he himself ejaculated "*Amen.*" But the translator here observes a small note in the margin of the MS., which seems to indicate that the knight's prowess had *won*, but by no means *conquered*, the fair heiress of the Château de Louvigny.

CHAPTER IX.

While the fool speeds, making fool's speeches,
Dancing along in his hairy breeches,
Sir William goes to see the Saxon,
Whom, as was just, he lays some whacks on.

It was on a fair summer's morning, during the reign of Edward the Confessor, that I landed at Romney, in England, and proceeded, after a few days' rest, towards London.

Passing through a wood, I found an armed Saxon coerl sitting by the roadside, who seeing a stranger, for I was clad in complete Norman-fashioned armour and followed by several men-at-arms in mail, asked me to let him join my company. The man was dressed after the Saxon manner; his

Digitized by Google

air was bold, and he possessed an extraordinary degree of dignity for a man of his low degree; but this seemed owing to the beauty of his tall and well-proportioned figure, for he seemed built for war. His face was so inclosed in the hood of his shirt of chain-mail, and so bandaged in consequence of a wound which seemed to have been lately received, that I could not see any part but his eyes, which were unusually bright; his speech, too, was greatly interrupted by the bandage, or injured by the wound, and was scarcely intelligible.

"All hail! sir knight," quoth he in the Norman language, "permit me to attend thee; for though thou meetest me here, I am of foreign descent; and these Saxon churls have of late borne so hardly and cruelly upon us strangers that I seek to quit the country; therefore again I pray thee to accept my poor services, and grant me thy protection. Ye appear to be strangers in the land, and I may perhaps be useful; my fortunes are at present low, but I am of good blood, even an Etheling, though thus poorly accoutred. I crave thy protection while here, and if thy return to thine own country be soon, mayhaps I may wish to attend ye, and seek kinder fortunes than this country affords, with which I am but too well acquainted."

"Truly, good gentleman, I willingly accept thine offer, for we are Normans and strangers. I suppose thou speakest the Saxon tongue?"

"Perfectly, sir knight."

"Then join my company, and pass for one of my train; we ride slowly, and, if thou art able, keep pace with us till time serves, and I will buy thee a palfrey."

"Brave knight, ride thine own pace, and that of Harding, though on foot, shall not fail in thy company. But the day closes, these woods are not over safe for Normans in such times; let me lead thee to the castle of Alfnoth, the childe of Sussex, where good cheer awaits the stranger knight; especially if he be a Norman, for the childe has been over seas with our good King Edward, and greatly favours those of thy country."

"Good Harding, if that be thy name, lead us where thou wilt, for our appetites and swords are keen; we fear neither

Digitized by Google

foe nor food, but are ready to do battle with either: the latter, however, would at this moment be the more welcome of the two; so, lead on, and we will follow."

We soon reached the small castle of Bodiam, in which the childe of Sussex was then living. Situate in a pleasant vale on a channel of the Rother river, it was a square, flanked by goodly round towers of strong masonry at each angle, with a wide moat, deep and filled with water. The castle stood near the river, but on a gentle rise; so that the swelling of the stream, though it might refresh the moat, never much affected the donjon. I have seen many stout castles, and fine countries, whose romantic scenes were of a very pleasant description,—castles of great power, and fit for royal state and defence; but methinks, in all my wanderings, I never saw a small tower, for occasional private residence, of greater beauty and inducement than this of Bodiam, with its grassy glades, its sunny slopes, and shady woods, which hung upon the hills around like a beleaguering army. The limpid Rother, between its pretty banks flowed gently past the wall, with crystal clearness and silvery rippling sounds; nor was the stillness of the scene troubled, save occasionally by the clang of arms, when hostile chiefs made excursions from their strongholds.

Passing through the small village of Ewhurst, we came over the hill and looked down upon the cheering landscape; then descending, we passed the stream by a ford, and approached the castle, the gate of which faced from the river. Proceeding to the drawbridge we sounded a parley, which brought a warder to the walls, who, being informed of my name and country, let down the drawbridge. Our horses' hoofs were quickly heard pattering over its thickly-nailed surface, and clanging amidst the echoes of the arched gateway.

In the yard beyond stood Childe Alfnoth, courteously to receive us.

"All hail! gentle knights," quoth he as we alighted, "welcome! welcome to Bodiam, courteous sirs!"

Alfnoth was about fifty years of age, with a forehead falling back, and a face somewhat projecting in the lower part; rather high cheek-bones, and in his look was something

Digitized by Google

serpent-like; but his manners overflowed with that exceeding civility that left nothing unsaid or undone which the most exact etiquette demanded.

The dress of Alfnoth was that of a Saxon nobleman: his beard was thick and pointed, he wore a green silken tunic, or *roc*, ornamented with gilt embroidery and descending to the knee: the collar and cuffs were of light grey fur, the sleeves were slashed above, but sat tight, and in small plaits or folds from the elbows to the wrists, which were encircled by ivory bracelets of curious workmanship, inlaid with emeralds. His waist was girded by a baldric, studded with precious stones and fastened in front by a large circular clasp of pure gold highly embossed, a diamond of great value forming the centre. From this baldric, in which was stuck a beautiful hunting-knife, the earl's golden-hilted sword was suspended; it was short, broad, straight, and said to have belonged to Hengist.

Over the childe's left shoulder, to the front of which it was attached by a strong brooch formed of rubies set in frosted gold, hung his mantle, or short cloak, of scarlet cloth, lined with ermine and edged with gold embroidery, similar to that of the ornamented roc: close drawers of white linen reached to the ankles, cross-bandaged with stripes of red woollen from the knee downwards. His *scohs*, or shoes, were of brown leather, laced from the instep to the toe with thongs, and though unbuskined, the earl wore his golden spurs of huge size, and richly worked to resemble curling serpents. His head was bare, the thick but nearly grey locks hanging down, waving and graceful; and from his neck a crucifix was suspended by a heavy chain of gold.

Such was the dress of the Saxon nobleman who welcomed me to his castle. It was plain that Alfnoth was a courtier both by nature and by habit. He was brave, but good-natured, bland, and full of submission to the powerful for the better furtherance of his purposes, yet these were usually just and honourable. The enemy of Earl Godwin and of Harold, he sought favour with King Edward by his apparent regard for the Normans. But the secret motives of the childe arose from his hatred of Earl Godwin, whose power he thought dangerous, whose family he hated,

Digitized by Google

and had helped to bring into that misfortune and disgrace in which, at that moment, they were plunged. For Godwin had fled to Bruges, and his son Harold to Ireland, to escape the indignation of the king, which was excited by their quarrel with his Norman flatterers, with whom the childe had leagued against his enemy Earl Godwin: and so great was his hatred that he had refused the hand of his daughter Editha to Harold, though Godwin was favourable to an alliance which would have added so much to his already great power and influence.

Editha had never seen Harold, and was secretly attached to a nobleman named Alfric; they were however unable to meet each other except by stealth, and Alfric had informed her that he was obliged to follow his friend Harold to Ireland. This had cast her into a deep melancholy, as her father had forbidden all intercourse with the adherents of Earl Godwin; she had once expressed a warm admiration for Alfric, at which the childe took fire, and forbade her to mention even his name; of which I greatly approved, for young maidens are weak and capricious, and their foolishness should always be so pruned and trimmed as to suit their family interests and the glory of their name. Young man, remember that young women are like yew-trees, crooked and stubborn, and must be cut by the parents' wisdom into fair and orderly shapes: behold those delicate cocks and hens, and other fair forms, into which the cunning hand of my gardener has reared and clipped my yew-trees and box edges, to the great admiration and wonderment of the beholders—a matter of much delight and sober reflection for all females, whether they be mothers or daughters, as they may therein perceive the symbols of duty, both parental and household.

We had no sooner alighted and performed the usual gratulations of politeness, than the childe himself conducted us up the staircase of a round tower into a small armoury, and thence into a spacious apartment, fresh strewed with rushes curiously twisted into cunning maundry works. Here we were received by the Lady Editha, surrounded by her women, who were employed at their various occupations.

The daughter of Alfnoth was at this period twenty-five

Digitized by Google

years of age, above the middle height, and of a form which was not only magnificent in its general symmetry, enhanced by grace in all her movements, but in its minutest details so critically beautiful that each part arrested admiration. The head of Editha was of that superb form which is rarely to be seen but in those effigies at Rome, chiselled, they say, by the ancient pagans of Greece. Her large blue eyes beamed with a soft but calm expression, and the eyelids seemed fatigued with the weight of those dark long eyelashes, which were rather destined for a shade to the beholder than a protection for the lustrous eyes to which they belonged; her nose, straight and small, was white as alabaster, her snowy teeth contrasted strongly with the full rich lip of deepest vermilion, and her smile threw a light around. Yet the ordinary look of this attractive woman was more resolved and full of thought than playful, and at such times her compressed lips gave a solemnity to her countenance bordering upon severity.

The neck and shoulders of Editha were exquisitely turned; they, and they alone, seemed worthy of supporting a head and face so beautiful; nor can the Saxon maid be better described than by the name of "*swan's neck*," which was bestowed upon this lovely woman by her countrymen. There was indeed a minute delicacy of proportion in her figure consistent throughout; and, if altogether the most lovely among the women of her country, you could also say that each particular beauty was the most perfect in its kind. The word *elegance* seemed made for Editha. In her look, in her figure, in her manner, elegance was her predominant charm. She appeared to be a being of such slight texture, that, like a delicate flower, the first harsh wind would wither and destroy her for ever; yet her lightness of step had such majesty and grace, that the amazed beholder wondered when he saw the strength and activity displayed by the sylphic creature, who appeared to walk in air. Many damsels are gifted with a face and form so handsome as to excite great admiration, yet some attendant defect draws us down to earth, and tells us we behold a mortal; but on seeing Editha, the sight was dazzled by an assemblage of charms rivalling each other in all their thrilling and fascinating

Digitized by Google

attractiveness—an attractiveness so magical that it seemed cast over her charms as a thin and silvery veil, softening yet enhancing her bewitching beauty with a celestial lustre.

"Now Editha, let supper be prepared, for our friends are no doubt a-hungered after their long ride, and I hope the Normans find our English air keen and wholesome. Have you long been in this country, sir knight?" said Alfnoth; addressing me in the Norman language, which he however spoke badly.

"But yesterday," answered I, as we seated ourselves at the large oaken table near the fire, my men-at-arms mixing with the retainers of the childe in the adjoining kitchen, which communicated by a wide opening, so as to be almost one with the large apartment of the Saxon chief. In the midst of the latter stood the great oaken table supported by massive legs, grotesquely carved to resemble those of the lion, with men's heads at the top, on which the board rested. On the walls were suspended such parts of the armour of the earl as he daily wore. His circular wooden shield, painted red, was covered with the strong hide of the ox, bound round the rim with a broad band of polished silver, a bright boss and steel spike ornamenting the centre. This shield hung over the ample chimney-piece, or rather fire-chamber; for within its precincts several of the family usually sat round the blazing embers which occupied the centre. In one part of the spacious hall were seen groups of Saxon damsels and knights holding sweet converse upon tales of love and war, while in other parts the servants were employed in their various duties. There sat the harper with his *cruit*, telling some story of bygone days or modern achievement. There the fool, ever on the move, performed his grimaces to the amusement of the menials; while the beggar sat expectant near the kitchen fire, watching the roasting joints. Dogs lay here and there; hawks were perched upon the massive cross-beams of the roof, amidst bows and arrows; and the Danish battleaxes, and accursed *seax* (from which weapon the Saxons take their name), were hung around at hand in case of sudden need. Such was the scene in the apartments of the Saxon chief, the hall and the kitchen being nearly one. A screen concealed, at her

Digitized by Google

pleasure, the Lady Editha, from behind which, unseen, she directed the domestic arrangements.

During the repast I observed that the childe fixed his eye several times on the Saxon ceorl.

"Where got ye that wight?" said Alfuoth; "he seems to be a man of great strength."

"He has joined me since my landing in England," replied I; "have you aught against him?"

"No, sir knight; but his bearing is beyond that of a ceorl, and in these times we meet strange characters here in England. The Saxons, I am sorry to say, like not the Normans, and our good king and myself, with some few others, are looked upon with an evil eye, because we seek to honour your brave and more polished countrymen. You have no doubt heard that Earl Godwin and his sons have fled the kingdom? By God's truth it was high time, for they were fain to rule the realm, and save our good king that trouble! But we can better do without them—the insult to the earl of Boulogne was past all further sufferance. As to Harold, he is virtuous and brave, but fully as ambitious as his father: he fled to Ireland, where he raises troops and hopes to awe the king; but we have men as good as he who will stand by the monarch and the strangers. This Harold wanted to have the hand of my fair daughter; but though he was then a *gesith*, or companion of the king, and his rank and power are above all other ealdormen in the land, yet I have such a hatred to the father, that no blood of mine shall mingle with his. Let us now leave this discourse and return to your ceorl: be wary of him; while you are in my castle you are safe, but as you pass through our thick woods 'twere better to keep good watch upon his motions."

As the childe finished this, the menials entered the room, bearing the supper meats, all hot, and served upon the spits by the kneeling domestics, while others bore large drinking-vessels with nobs of brass for marking the depth to which each guest might quaff without being intoxicated; but if he chose to pass the sign he was welcome, for the Saxon loves to drink.

The lady then seated herself on the dais beside her father, and I sat on his other hand. Several Saxon gentlemen,

Digitized by Google

affecting Norman manners and dress, were present: yet the style and cookery of the supper was Saxon. Stewed porpoise, roasted crane, beef with cabbage, various jellies and pastry, formed into many and curious conceits, such as castles and wild animals, and other such conceits, ferocious to behold but pleasant to eat. All were served hot in the cooking vessels, from which, and from the spits, each guest helped himself.

When Editha spoke, it was in the Saxon tongue, for it was plain she liked neither the Normans nor their language. Her dress was the loose robe of her own country, bound round her slender waist with a girdle of great price, richly set with precious stones; instead of the Saxon hood, or "headrail," as they call that gear, she was uncovered, and her luxuriant long flaxen hair, which acquired for her the appellation of "*the Maiden of the Creator, with the twisted locks*," fell in thick plaits over her shoulders, shining with a golden lustre as the light played upon its soft rich silky surface. The Lady Editha was not a vain woman, but in this point she had adopted the Norman mode, except that a little above her forehead shone all sparkling with gems the famous "golden fly," so fashionable among the Saxons. Undoubtedly she bore us no good will, so we may suppose, that had her head been less richly endowed we should have found her national costume as rigidly adhered to in that particular as in the rest of her apparel.

During supper, the *scop* or bard sung the songs of Horsa to the sound of his *cruit*, and the Saxon ceorl Harding, seemed so pleased with the attachment which Editha displayed towards the customs of her nation, its dress and language, that he appeared resolved to attend upon her, and upon none other; nor did she conceal her satisfaction by the condescension with which she received his homage, compared to her haughty air towards the Normans. When Harold's name was at times mentioned despitefully by her father, her cheek was charged with a slight paleness, which passed as the thin fleecy cloud flits over the lustrous moon. When Harold's name was mentioned with scorn, an acute observer might discover that Alfnoth's dislike of Harold

Digitized by Google

was not in accordance with the maiden's wishes; whether those wishes were influenced by love, or by ambition, or by patriotism, was not so clear: perhaps by all.

Now the attendants again entered with salvers bearing silver cups of spiced wine, and horns filled with hydromel and beer. The fair Editha then rose from her seat, not choosing to sanction by her presence the deep potations of her countrymen, in which her Norman guests seemed averse to join. With that dignity peculiar to the Saxon women, she took the golden goblet from the menial, wishing "To all health," and first putting the cup to her lips, then presented it to me.

My eyes were so fixed by her beauty, that I hardly knew what I did, and received the goblet with an awkwardness I was not wont to betray. The maiden saw the cause, and, smiling courteously, wished me good night. Curtsying low to the company, she retired to rest. Long afterwards the servants brought in the sleeping-mats, and the watch being set, the keys of the castle were delivered by the warder to the noble castellan, who was not a little intoxicated.

CHAPTER X.

The good knight lists to lovers' stories,
To hear which sometimes a great bore is!

When the day dawned, I and my companion arose, and the servants entered, bearing towels and silver basins full of water for us to wash; they were accompanied by a barber, for Alfnoth was well aware that to shave the beard daily was the Normans' custom.

I had scarcely sallied forth upon the battlements to enjoy the fresh air, and behold the beauty of the scenery, when presently Harding came to me, saying the morning repast was prepared, and the childe prayed of me to descend and partake thereof.

I descended the narrow circular staircase of the tower,

Digitized by Google

but had not made three steps ere I heard a half-exclamation from a female; what the words were I could not distinguish, but I heard Harding, who was in front, in a low and anxious tone, different from that which he had hitherto assumed, "Hush!"

I was hidden by the winding of the staircase, yet continuing to descend, encountered the Lady Editha, pale and agitated. She attempted to conceal her face, but the narrowness of the way compelled me to pass so close that her agitation was evident. However, I pretended not to discover it, and with a common salutation, passed down, until I entered the great hall of the castle.

"Good den, sir knight," said the childe, "how fared ye the past night?"

"Right well, most noble childe, and I think, with your kind leave, to pass onwards towards London with my Saxon guide."

"Nay good Sir William, so it may not be, that a noble gentleman and a stranger should leave me so suddenly. I crave at least one day more of your good presence; and Editha, my girl," said he, turning to the fair damsel, who at that moment entered the chamber, "lay a lady's commands on this Norman gentleman, that he quit us not so soon." Editha coloured deeply, and said,—

"Surely Sir William Mallet, who has crossed the seas to look at England, can spare the childe of Sussex and his daughter a few days' sojourn in Bodiam Castle. My father loves strangers, and if, as I fear, a Saxon woman be barbarous and ignorant, and less worthy than our more refined neighbours, her inferiority will be pardoned by so courteous and gentle a knight as Sir William Mallet. No doubt some fair Norman dame, whose beauty far exceeds what we homely Saxons can aspire to, has long since won the hand of so gallant a gentleman, and by her eyes I entreat you tarry with us yet awhile. She has nought to fear from one so unblessed with beauty as myself. Nor, I ween, wouldst thou be capable of such disloyalty as to forget her loveliness."

Her manner made it evident she wished me to remain, and had nothing happened on the staircase I would have

Digitized by Google

thought my person and fame had as much influence as her father's wishes in producing the above speech; but after what had passed, I saw that there was some mystery in her invitation, and there was laughing mischief in her eye, when she spoke so lightly of her own and her countrywomen's beauty. Methought also that the effect produced upon me the evening before, as she presented the spiced wine, had not escaped her notice, and that she trusted much to it for detaining me at Bodiam Castle.

I was right in thinking she wished to detain me that day. I was right also in thinking she trusted something to her charms: and she too was right in so trusting, for at that moment my faith to the fair and far-off Lady Agatha, the heiress of Louvigny, was in great jeopardy. A small spot of foul disloyalty seemed to gather upon my fealty to the Norman damsel, which in a few days would have become a stain so deep, that all the waters of the romantic Orne, on whose banks my troth had been plighted, could not have washed it away!

"Fair damsel, your commands are law to me; but speak not of Norman dames: for by the cross! in all my wanderings, my eyes never fell upon so fair and comely a damsel as yourself; and should I travel until I meet one whose charms can rival yours, I should never rest more, but roam for ever, like the accursed and undying Israelite, who traverses the globe till the great day of general doom."

"Sir knight," replied the damsel, blushing, "you said, even yester even, that you seldom spoke; but methinks you study compliments, such as we poor Saxon maids do seldom hear, and still more rarely listen to: let us to breakfast, sirs."

"Are you for the chase with hawks, or will you attend Editha, who takes the air upon her palfrey?" said the childe, when the repast was finished. "Behold," he continued, "what brave birds we have there; rare hawks from St. Bride's and Ireland." He pointed to the rafters at the lower end of the apartment, where the hawks were perched; and as he spoke, the fine dogs lying near the dais seemed conscious and expectant of the coming sport, pricked up their ears, rose, and came forward, fawning upon their master.

Digitized by Google

"To attend the Lady Editha is my desire," said I, louting low to the noble castellan, "with her permission and yours;" then, turning to the fair one, I added,—

"Lady, I am a dull companion for so spirited and fair-spoken a damsel, being better able to do battle and defend your person, than gratify your mind with sage and instructive converse."

"Kind sir knight, I wish your agreeable company; take your arms, I beseech you, for know that our roads are not always safe in these disturbed times; besides," she added, in a low voice, seeing her father had gone to a distant part of the chamber, "I wish to speak with you in secret, and an hour hence expect your attendance."

Saying this she retired, and soon after, having given orders about my horses and arms, passed to the round tower, which contained the childe's armoury. There, stopping awhile to look at the Saxon weapons, I heard the following conversation; for it so happened that a loophole, pierced in the castle wall, was close to one of those in the tower; and though the persons in the adjacent chamber might converse very low, their words, carried through both loopholes by a current in the air, could be distinctly heard.

"Editha, my beloved! are we once more together? I am again with my beloved? But the moments are precious. Your father knows me not. The ceorl Harding is only known to his beloved Editha. Everything is arranged, and we shall soon be as we were—or be nothing! I shall go, perhaps, with this Norman to London; and then"—— here his voice was so low, that no more could be heard until the lady's voice came in reply,—

"Are you not afraid of discovery? I tremble for you; and be assured, my Alfric, my wish is for you to be away, delightful as this moment is—how can pleasure be enjoyed when your life is in peril? O no, no! get ye hence, go to your own people; let us trust in God, who will in his good time unite two beings who so devotedly love each other. My Harding! for as you have chosen that name, I love it, and dread to breathe your own. When my heart is filled with you, and you alone, I tremble lest my false lips speak the name I adore. Oh! Alfric, when at supper last night,

Digitized by Google

my fond heart knew you through your disguise, for every time you came near me, I felt I knew not what—a creeping feel of pleasure seemed to thrill my whole frame without a cause. But yes! there was a cause—it was you. I would disown myself if you could be near me, and that my heart felt not unusual emotion. The blind feel the approach of strong light though they see it not, and I felt your vicinity though I knew you not! Yes Alfric, yes! my whole frame was disturbed and my eyes were attracted, despite of myself, towards your figure. Even in the guise of a menial, the hero, the Saxon warrior, was there. My father too suspects you to be other than you appear, but thinks you have some evil designs against the Norman; he warned our guest to be on his guard. I see that I have made an impression on this young stranger, my Alfric, and felt ashamed of myself when persuading him to stay; it was a trick, and unworthy of me; only what courtesy demanded was said; but my manner did more than my words. Yet what could be done my Alfric? There was no other chance of speaking to you; and now, good God! what have I to say, but to tell you to fly—to leave me? and it is the lips of your devoted Editha that tell you this! But it must be, my Alfric. On the one hand is the heaven of seeing you; for even thus, and in this vile guise, it is heaven to see you. On the other is your great danger; and worse—yes Alfric, worse! there is deception, which is unbearable: deception towards my father. It is for no ill, but it is falsehood, and falsehood is unworthy of Editha—of the woman who possesses your heart, and who trusts in God to guard you in these dreadful times. Go, Alfric, for heaven's sake, go! In the name of the Holy Virgin, go! for this trial is past my power to bear. Good heavens! if you were discovered, what could save you? Nothing! no earthly power. Your great strength could do much, but could not save; and against whom would your death-dealing arm be raised?—against the father of your Editha!—against her! for if either you or Alfnoth fell, where is she to live? With you who killed her father? Without you? oh, no! Could I live with him who felled you to the ground, whose hateful hands struck down my soul's idol! No, never, were he a thousand fathers! O

Digitized by Google

Alfric fly! quit this place my beloved; a dreadful agony of horror hangs upon my soul, and I feel as if my terrors alone would betray you."

"Dearest Editha you are right; yet it was impossible to resist coming when so close to where you dwelt. A fugitive and an outlaw, disguised, dishonoured, and, to my sorrow, persecuted by your mistaken father, I live like a ceorl. Editha, I will yet have vengeance—their hour shall come! I scorn myself, stooping to this disguise for personal safety, but only do so for your sake. When it brings me to you, when I see and hear you, disguise is honour, is happiness, it is joy, and danger is welcome. You make me bear even the taunts against his countrymen in which your mistaken father indulges. To myself I say, it is not his country he hates when so praising these Normans. No! It is not any love for these Norman favourites, but his hatred of Godwin that so works on him.

"I love to think this, for the hate of man to man is common, and Godwin can defend himself; but when the thought comes, that the Saxon childe of Sussex takes part with Normans against Saxons, and that he is your father, my blood boils, Editha,—my own, my Saxon Editha! But Godwin and Harold will yet save England and her sons from these strangers. The Norman dogs shall be driven back to their own land. Their country is a noble one: let them stay there, and not come to disturb our rude Saxons with their fashions, and to rule a country in which they have no rights but what are given by a weak sovereign, grateful for a long sojourn among them. Unlucky is the land whose sovereign is not born and bred among his people.

"O Editha! it is sad to see the king of England bound by Norman education, by Norman kindred, and by Norman interests. Holy Virgin preserve us! is not Saxon blood as pure as Norman? Why should our king be ruled by these strangers? But my anger carries me away. You, my Editha, are Saxon, even to the ends of your beautiful fingers, and so I think your father would be but for his hatred to Godwin. I will go, Editha, but trust soon that we shall meet again. The Norman will depart to-morrow,

Digitized by Google

and I shall see and hear you for some hours. Your father, Editha, may yet relent in his dislike. Yes, he cannot renounce his pure Saxon blood, and you will some day be free to own your love for one who follows the fortunes of Earl Godwin and of Harold. I know them well, my Editha; you are aware that we have been inseparable, and, believe me, Harold would honour the Normans, even as your father does, were they in Normandy; but he cannot brook their ruling King Edward as they do. Over him they have indeed such influence, that they injure Harold's sister, the queen, in the king's love and confidence. They know how she loves the Saxons, and they hate her. Even your father, who knows her virtues, lets his hate of her brother influence his conduct towards her, who never injured him. But my Norman master," he added playfully, "will want his slave, and Harding must go;—still, to be near you, however, Editha, for in this neighbourhood Alfric will remain until Godwin's fate is decided: and be thou assured that he will soon appear with a retinue that shall secure his safety, and his power, against the Norman favourites of the king. Meanwhile, Editha, continue your reserve; mention not Alfric's name before your father; he believes him to be with Harold in Ireland, and his hatred to the fallen family would, I fear, be insurmountable."

"Alas!" said Editha, "almost hopeless am I. He speaks of you as the friend of Harold, and when he refused me to Harold himself, what prospect can there be for you, whose domains and power, though large, are far below Harold's? Never have I set eyes on Harold, but I admire his character too much not to be proud of your heroic friend's great deeds of arms; yet my Alfric, a convent for your Editha rather than have married him. My father's hatred of Earl Godwin saved us, and so far it has been good."

"No," said Alfric with eagerness, and his voice softening as he spoke, "no, Editha; I know Harold, and am well assured of his affection; he would have given you to me with all his heart—ay! and used his influence to gain your father's consent: never would Harold have rendered his dearest friend miserable when he could have saved him! But, by Odin, the warrior god! I swear that if Harold stood

Digitized by Google

between my beloved and myself, I would fell him with my battle-axe, as my most deadly enemy!"

"Dearest Alfric," said Editha, "swear not by Odin and false gods, but let us keep the faith in which our hopes are all placed, and think of our Lord and Saviour, and of the holy Mother of God, in whom is our trust and our safety!"

"Well, Editha, be it so; but somehow, when angry and grasping my good battle-axe, methinks to swear by the holy rood seems strange. Odin is an oath that chimes in well as the weapon clangs on the shield, or splits skull-cap and skull together, sending the brave spirit to Valhalla! By my troth, Editha, the songs of the Scandinavian scalds sound, and are better than an Ave Maria for warriors. When I hear our Northumbrians sing the song of Ladbrok, it is sweeter to me than the Song of Solomon! By the mass, do I! But that is only for battle; so let the Church rule, an ye will, and I will swear by the holy rood in your presence, my beautiful and good Editha!

"These Normans sing the Scandinavian songs better than we Saxons do; they are brave, these Norsemen, and more proud of their descent, and more pure of blood than ourselves. Ay! and they take more order for battle! Well would I like them if they stayed at home, and not infect England. Now Editha, the weald shere shall be my haunts, and often shall I see you, unknown by all eyes but those of love. I am here doing work for Harold among our brave Saxon ceorls, and by the halls of Valhalla—ha! pardon me, dear Editha, it was the bishop of Winchester's beard I meant to swear by—yet, by both, these Saxon ceorls are noble fellows, and it is well for my Norman galliard that I ride in his company, or he and his retinue would take more blows than their armour could bear. Yet he is a gallant gentleman, and would demean himself stoutly—particularly if you were looking on.

"Come, Editha, beloved one, don't blush, you know the effect of your beauty, and Normans have eyes. You cannot gainsay that."

"Quit this flattering nonsense, Alfric, and tell me when, where, and how shall I see you without danger to you?"

"You will see me cross your path, Editha, sometimes

Digitized by Google

armed as now; sometimes disguised differently. And if an old Saxon woman should ever beg alms, or offer to tell your fortune, you won't call your attendants to drive her from your gate, nor bid them listen to her tales—eh, Editha?"

"But Alfric, tell me, when will Harold return? How the thought makes me tremble! O God, O God! if you and my father meet in some horrid fray!"

"Suppose we do, my Editha, think you he will be in more danger from that, love? Oh, less, less! I will be then his guard, not his assailant. But ride not forth to meet evil, as our Saxon proverb has it; think not of sad things; they are bad enough when they come, without anticipation of their coming. Think rather of the force which Harold will have—of his great power; and above all these, think of and be sure, that he will, for my sake, seek to calm and soften that same obdurate Childe of Sussex, and so win you. If he cannot be persuaded, tell me, Editha, will you fly with me, when the time comes that I can protect you?"

"Alfric," answered Editha, in a voice almost stifled by emotion, "I will! I swear to you by the God we worship, that when all persuasion fails, and my father still refuses, I will give myself to you! Were there aught in you of dishonour, aught to blame—if his refusal was founded upon objections personal toy ourself, I would marry no other man, but, obedient to my father, I would not marry you, and would seek in a convent that peace which the world could no longer give! But it is not so, my Alfric; a thousand times have I heard him, when uninfluenced by passion, speak of Harold as the best man he knew, saving in his Saxon politics. The man he hates is Godwin; he talks much of him, and, with the king, believes he murdered Alfred. Forgive me, dear Alfric, I am sure the father of your friend committed no such crime; but my father believes this as well as the king, and I respect his anger. Moreover, he thinks Earl Godwin was his rival at the court of Edward, and that he cannot bear; it is a weakness Alfric, but who has not a weakness? Yet, with all this prejudice, he does you and Harold justice, and therefore I swear to you, that if all other means fail I will fly with you!"

Digitized by Google

"Dearest Editha, now am I happy; a few months must decide our fate: meantime, I shall see you. Now adieu, my beloved!"

"Adieu!" said Editha, adding cheerfully, "Don't forget to send the old woman to me soon, and as often as you can."

Here they parted. The hour to ride was nearly come, but I was not altogether pleased with the discovery I had made. The Lady Agatha of Louvigny again began to take the ascendant.

CHAPTER XI.

The thieves, defeated, turn their backs,
No mortals can endure such whacks!

THE party was quickly ready, all lightly armed, except myself. I was fully equipped with my lance, and my good iron mace hanging at the saddle-bow; for after the late conversation, I thought it not wise to be unprepared for all accidents, being a Norman.

The Childe, with his dogs and hawks, accompanied us part of the way; but he being called off by the sight of some herons, Editha and myself continued our ride to the glades, along the banks of the little winding river Rother, attended by a strong body of retainers, and Norman men-at-arms. The Saxon Harding, or, if so thou wilt, Alfric, followed the Childe.

We had little inclination for parlance, myself and the damsel were preoccupied—I with what had so lately reached my ears—the lady, with her love.

Suddenly our reveries were disturbed by a horseman furiously galloping through the wood, and shouting "To the rescue! to the rescue, ho!" Hardly had the sounds reached our ears, when the man came up, his face pale, bloody, and agitated.

"They have set upon the Childe, and carried him off, and many of the attendants are slain. Harding, the Saxon, was

Digitized by Google

fighting desperately when I came away; he had killed several, and was pursuing those who bore off the Childe, but he was bleeding sorely, and will hardly be able to deal with them if he overtakes them—they are too numerous. He sent me back for aid; and by the mass! that ceorl when he commands will not be disobeyed. But he told me not to stay here; so follow me who will!"

Saying this, he turned his horse's head, and went back with the same speed; I pushed after him, ordering our followers to attend the Lady Editha to the castle with all speed.

Editha's alarm was great, and for an instant she could scarcely sit upon her palfrey; but then, collecting her courage, she turned her horse's head, saying,

"Brave Saxons and Normans, follow me!"

So saying, she galloped into the wood with her people, pursuing my track. She soon came up with me, for I and my horse being in complete armour, the animal could not go at great speed, and I did not like to press him forward; having to encounter numbers, it was necessary to be fresh for the fight.

"I am light," said Editha, as she shot past at speed. "Go gently, brave knight, spare your horse, and I will follow till I gain sight of the murderers. When I see them, you will hear my shrieks; the sound will direct you. Let only those who are lightly armed follow me," said the maiden; and she darted away at the top of her horse's speed. As she galloped along, her searching eye soon discovered what her heart trembled to find—blood! just where the road turned in the thickest part of the wood. She shuddered, but her rapid course was not checked. Whirling round the turn undaunted, her horse sprung over a dead Saxon attendant,—another lay wounded beyond.

"Fly, lady, fly!" cried the wounded man; but she heard him not. Her blood curdled, she felt sick, and darkness came over her eyes; still she kept her seat, and with a desperate resolution recovered herself.

"Courage Editha, courage!" addressing herself; "your father's life depends on your courage; on, Editha, on!" And on she went, the spirit, by a convulsive effort, sus-

Digitized by Google

taining that fragile form of beauty; when the warm blood rushed to her heart, the master mind repelled it thence to sustain the fainting members, and she urged her forward course with a force equal to the trial. I shall now leave her rushing along the wood, passing the dead and wounded men, unappalled by the fate of the former and the cries of the latter, who implored her not to proceed in her perilous career, but to turn and fly towards the castle for succour.

Such were the Lady Editha's emotions and feelings, for she did afterwards so describe them to me. As for myself, during this short period, when the noble lady shot past me in the wood, I groaned for very shame that I could not go more swiftly, and was half inclined to throw away my armour, with that of my horse, and so trust to my sword. Alas! never did mortal man suffer such pain as I did to see this fair dame press swiftly to the danger before me; it was worse than death—but her fate and their fate might hang upon my lance, and the imprudence of such a step was too evident; so cantering slowly, and sounding my horn from time to time, I endeavoured to give hopes of assistance to those in distress.

I had not proceeded far beyond the first wounded man when I heard the screams of Editha, and saw her beckoning: at the same time the loud cries of combatants struck upon my ears.

"Now Loke!" said I, spurring my black charger; "now Loke, my gallant horse, put forth all thy devilry, and serve thy master well, as thou art wont to do in combat."

The noble beast, conscious of his master's praise, and aware that the battle approached, seemed full of ardour; loudly neighing, he went off at speed, and soon passed Editha.

"Lady," said I, "approach not too near!"

In a moment I reached the combatants. The Childe was down, apparently dead; Harding the Saxon stood above the body, surrounded by foes, but fiercely whirling his battle-axe round his head with matchless vigour. Of the other attendants two only were standing, both desperately engaged, surrounded and outnumbered by the assailants, who seemed on the point of success when I shocked among

Digitized by Google

them, lance in rest, and shouting our Norman war-cry. Horse and man staggered under my charge—crashing through their defensive plates went my heavy weapon, and though one man with a battle-axe split my shield, before he could give a second blow the blade of Harding was buried in his shoulders. The band of robbers, for such they were, soon fled, leaving twelve of their companions dead upon the field.

Harding was covered with blood, but not badly wounded. The Childe, whose wounds were dangerous, but not mortal, had swooned. Editha, who had followed closely, alighted in the midst of the fight, and raised her father in her arms.

"My father, my dear father! Great God, he is dead!" she exclaimed, in an agony of horror; but Alfnoth opened his eyes.

"My Editha! are we safe? What do ye here, child, among these villains?" said the chief, trying to collect his senses.

"We are safe, my beloved father, if you are so. Where are you hurt?"

"I was stunned by a blow from a mace, and I am wounded in the back by a dagger, but not much. Where is the ceorl Harding? That noble youth saved my life. Is he safe, or have they slain him?"

"I am safe, noble Childe," said Harding.

"But for thy great strength and courage, brave ceorl, I was a lost man. My head is confused as yet, nor do I see distinctly; raise me more up—there. But Editha, you are bloody?"

"It is your blood, my dearest father; I am not hurt."

"I recover fast," said the Childe; "I see you all about me; how did we escape? Good Harding, give me thy hand. Good sir Norman, I crave your pardon, but I must steal your servants. Harding must never leave me, I owe my life to him."

"Not to me," said Harding; "it was this gallant Norman who saved us all. Your two brave servants and myself were well-nigh spent when he arrived with your matchless daughter, and setting his tough lance in the rest over-

Digitized by Google

threw all before him, leaving more of the ruffians on the ground than have escaped."

"This daring band have long vexed the country under the pretence of being the Earl Godwin's partisans; but they are not so—they are robbers," said Alfnoth. "Yet little did I suspect they would venture to attack the Childe of Sussex in his own domains!"

By this time Editha had, with great expertness, bound up her father's wounds with part of her robe, which she had torn into strips. Some of her people went for aid from the castle, while others cut down branches with their poleaxes, and quickly twisted and bound them into a bearer.

While these matters were arranging, the chief addressed Harding.

"My brave friend come near to me," said he. "Are you hurt?"

"I have lost some blood, but this matters little, as I have been of use to you and the Lady Editha," replied Harding, who was bleeding apace.

"Editha, my dear girl," said Alfnoth, "bind up Harding's wound; he bleeds fast."

Editha blushed deeply, and with trembling hands quickly stanched the blood, but had no sooner accomplished it than she fainted. Fearful for the lives of her lover and her father, she had wound her courage to a point beyond her strength. She had watched Harding's movements, and seeing him firm in his step and voice, she conjectured that he had not suffered dangerously, for she was deeply skilled in leech lore, as all the Saxon damsels are; yet still her fondness made her apprehensive, and she was also fearful of discovering him by her anxiety; so she waited for her father's commands. But when she had tied up his wounds, and saw both Harding and Alfnoth safe, nature gave way.

Harding caught her in his arms, and bore her to a brook, where, sprinkling water on her pallid face, she soon opened her large blue eyes upon her lover.

"I am quite well, Harding," said she, softly; "I am quite well."

"I can endure this no longer, Editha. I will discover

Digitized by Google

myself to your father. If ever we are to have hope, now is the time. If he refuses our marriage, he will at least let me see you."

Now the attendants, by the Childe's desire, bore him on the twisted boughs to the brook, where Harding and his daughter stood alone; for when Editha fainted, nearly all the company were dispersed, some collecting the horses, some examining the bodies and stripping them, others binding fast two wounded robbers. Thus Harding had reached the brook, and recovered his fair burthen before any one assisted him—the Childe crying out to those about him to bear him to her. Finding his daughter better, he pressed her to his bosom.

"This has been a rough day my Editha for your slight frame, let us move towards home as fast as these good ceorls can bear me."

"Sir Childe," said Harding, in a low voice, to the chief, "hear me. I do not want to presume upon any small service of to-day; I would have done the same for the poorest among your followers; but Alfnoth, I am not what I seem. Send the people to a distance, all but this brave Norman."

"In the name of the holy Virgin," replied the wondering Childe, "who are you?"

"Send your people away, and you shall know speedily," said Harding.

"Good Sir William Mallet, abide with us; but you, good varlets, avaunt, leave us. I want to speak with Harding. Remain half a bowshot from us, and collect the arms of those robbers."

The attendants did as desired.

"Now Harding, good youth, speak, and tell me to whose brave arm I owe my life; for, by the rood, I never saw man so use a battle-axe in fight, as you did yours this blessed day."

"Good and brave Sir William," said Harding, turning to me, "I crave your pardon; first, for so much deceit as I have practised upon you, yet with no disloyal intention, in serving you under a feigned name."

I bowed and accepted the proffered apology.

"Next, sir knight, I ask your pledge of secrecy, for my

Digitized by Google

life depends upon your silence, and willingly do I trust it in the keeping of so brave and doughty a chevalier."

Won by the frank speech of the unknown knight, I answered—

"Truly, as I am a loyal knight, I vow never to disclose any secret you may think fitting to divulge before me; but I think 'twere well for me to leave you alone with this noble gentleman, rather than hear aught which cannot concern me."

"No," said the Saxon; "a secret in your keeping, sir knight, is safe. I pray you remain. Let me prove to you the high estimate I have formed of your valour and your noble character. Childe Alfnoth, brave and worthy chief," added the Saxon, as he turned towards the litter, "I crave your hand, and pardon. The devotion which I bear towards the Lady Editha has prompted me to enter your good castle in disguise, to see once more her whom I love beyond all earthly beings, and whom I here ask at your hands in marriage. She knows me not"—here Editha started in amaze—"but yet I trust both she and you will deem me no unworthy suitor."

Saying this, he removed the bandages with which he had hitherto concealed his face, and pulled off his helmet at the same time.

"What! Earl Harold!" exclaimed the astonished Childe.

"Earl Harold!" repeated Editha, in utter amazement.

"Harold!" ejaculated I, my usual taciturnity being betrayed into an exclamation.

"Even so, most noble Childe," said Harold, calmly. "Your daughter met me accidentally; she knew me not as Harold, and I, unable to resist her charms, called myself by my friend Alfric's name. As Alfric I have always met her. I knew you would not consent to our marriage—for Harold you had rejected. I feared that she also would reject my love under my real name, so I assumed that of Alfric, and was careful that she should never see me where she could discover that Alfric and Harold were one. None of the meetings we have ever had were planned by your daughter. Whatever wrong there is, is mine; and here I crave your pardon, even on my bended knee, most noble

Digitized by Google

father of my beloved Editha! The proud Harold asks you for her hand. Excellent chieftain, let this day end our sad feuds. Editha speak for me!"

Editha tried to speak, but in vain. She fell on her knees at her father's side, and, bursting into tears, buried her face in his bosom.

He looked sternly at Harold and at his daughter for some time without uttering; then said—

"It is the will of God; the will of God be done! but it is passing strange! The son of Earl Godwin the husband of Editha!" Again he paused in deep thought.

"Think of Harold, and not of Earl Godwin!" said the great Saxon chief. "Godwin has been your enemy; Harold never was so. Think of Harold then, Childe Altnoth—and think of Editha."

The Childe was still silent. But it is time to return to the affairs of Matilda.

CHAPTER XII.

Which speaks of wicked things in olden days,
When dames and gold were seized in many ways.

We left Matilda and her father in his castle of Ghent, when the insolent Anjou quitted them, full of his meditated vengeance upon the beautiful and innocent Matilda. She sought her apartment that she might unbosom her grief to her old nurse, with whom she was accustomed to talk over all her troubles, and who, like all the Flemish women, was replete with marvellous stories, strange prodigies, and unholy appearances, which ancient folks know to be awful to the eye and to the ear, and truly not lightly to be dwelt upon in ordinary parlance, for the foul fiend (here the marginal note observes that Sir William crossed himself devoutly) takes strange shapes and cunning ways to deceive us poor and ignorant mortals. His look and voice are indeed at times very terrific.

Digitized by Google

"Jesu Maria! what is that I hear?" said the knight, starting, and again crossing himself.

"Nothing, sir," said his amanuensis. "Nothing but the Lady Mallet scolding the women, sir."

"Humph!" said the worthy old gentleman, a little nettled at having started so; "and do you call that nothing, varlet?"

"I did not mean any disrespect to the Lady Mallet, sir. I only meant it was not the—the—the—"

"Devil I suppose, boy; but never be so glib with your 'nothings,' sir. The foul fiend takes forms of much deception, and we should always be on our guard, and ready with our beads. But as we were saying, the Lady Matilda entered her chamber where her old nurse, Gertrude, was industriously spinning on her wheel, as usual, with her spectacles on her nose, her short russet jacket and load of thick petticoats.

"Well, my dear lady, what ails you?" said she, stooping her head to look over the upper rim of her spectacles.

Matilda sat down by her, and said,

"Dear Gertrude, I am troubled by that odious count of Anjou, who has been with us this morning in the garden. He wants my father to give me in marriage to him, and I'd rather be dead. However, I am silly for being frightened; and, to say the truth, I am more angry than frightened, for my father says he will never consent to my marriage with the count. So I am quite safe; but Anjou, as he went out said, 'When we meet next I will say more,' and that, added to his terrible look, frightened me, dear Gertrude; but it is passing away."

"Did he say so?" said the old woman; "then be careful, for the rumour goes that he has sold himself to the Evil One, my child, and for my part I believe it; so be careful, I tell thee, child. Never go without your relics; and, above all, never let the silver box that contains the cinder of St. Lawrence be out of your pocket; keep St. Jude's little finger carefully about your neck also; 'tis said 'twill press you if danger be near. I am afraid of this Geoffrey, he is a sad man; no maiden is safe within a hundred leagues of his castles, men do say; and none that ever entered it were seen to come out."

Digitized by Google

Here the old woman and Matilda crossed themselves devoutly.

"When such men vow vengeance, my dear lady, they have the help of some evil spirits who do any mischief that they are bid; and though these horrid sinners will suffer for their sins, that is no comfort to you if he gets you into one of his horrid castles, for you will never get safe out again. I am sadly afraid, child, that this man will do you some mischief; he is like one of your own ancestors, Count Bras-de-fer. I will tell you the story this evening, fair maid, by our fire-side."

The evening came, and Matilda was anxious to hear the story of Baldwin Bras-de-fer.

"Well nurse, remember your promise. I am come to hear the story of Bras-de-fer."

The good nurse put by her eternal spinning-wheel, pulled off her spectacles, and putting them carefully into a shagreen case, trimmed her lamp and pulled her chair to the fire. Matilda drew close to her nurse.

"BALDWIN BRAS-DE-FER.

"Some years ago, when your grandfather was alive, he had a varlet, the sieur Jacques Severin, who was then an elderly man. Report said that this same sieur Jacques had been very wild in his youth; but when I knew him he was old, and very good-natured to damsels. I was myself very young then, and they used to say I had a good figure. Lack-a-day! my dear young lady, those times are gone by now, but I was then a pretty maiden; at least so the young varlets used to tell me. Well! well! be that as it may; Jacques Severin told me that he well remembered your great-grandfather, Count Baldwin Bras-de-fer, and a sad wicked man he was."

"So I have heard," said Matilda.

"Yes, very wicked indeed, child, caring for neither God nor devil; just like this count that wants to have you; and what he resolved upon that he would have, pay what price he might, whether in blood or in money."

"That was dreadful."

"Ay, truly! he never set eyes on a pretty wench but he carried her off; and the sad things that have happened

Digitized by Google

in this castle, ay, in this very room—for this was his chamber, dear lady, and saw strange pranks, as the sieur Jacques told me, shocking to think of. But, as I was saying, Bras-de-fer never saw a pretty girl but he carried her off. I never saw him. Alas! alas! had he seen me, God knows what might have happened; but I was not born then, praised be the Holy Virgin, and my mother was a very ugly and a very virtuous dame, who lived retired. No evil happened to me from Bras-de-fer. Well, dear lady, 'One day,' said Jacques Severin, who was a follower of the count's, and as I said, a wicked youth, 'one day we heard the count's horn blow loud, and saw the count standing in complete armour, high on the battlements of the castle. He cried aloud, and his heralds, who were spread through the town below, repeated one after another, 'Come all and hear! come all, and hear your feudal lord, the Count Baldwin Bras-de-fer!'"

"Soon all ran to the castle, for all well knew, when that dreaded horn was sounded, Bras-de-fer was bent upon some enterprise of rapine, and his followers exulted in the hopes of a rich booty. Oh, he was a doughty knight! and when 'Flanders to the rescue' was heard in the fight, all cried out, 'Bras-de-fer! Bras-de-fer!' and quickly a lane opened in the fray, for death awaited the wight who abided the spear or sword of Bras-de-fer. When warriors talked around their camp-fires at night, and you heard them say, 'May the Holy Mother speed him, for he is a strong and stanch chevalier,' 'twas sure they conversed of Bras-de-fer. The day that Jacques spoke of, that on which they heard his clarion and his voice from the tower, they had all assembled, and were listening.

"'My companions!' said the count, 'what woman do you know of worthy to be my wife; to be the countess of Flanders, and to wed Count Baldwin Bras-de-fer, your lord and master?' For a while the men-at-arms murmured in consultation, at last all cried aloud:

"'We know of none fit to be the wife of Count Baldwin Bras-de-fer.'

"'By the salvation of my soul!' cried the count, 'there is one, nevertheless. She is young, she is beautiful, she is fruitful, she is of high lineage, she wears the hood of a queen,

Digitized by Google

and is called 'the beautiful widow.' Is not she worthy of Bras-de-fer?'

"The men-at-arms cried out, 'Yes! yes! she is worthy of our lord, Count Baldwin Bras-de-fer.'

"'Then,' cried out the count, once more in a loud voice, 'she will this evening pass by at three leagues' distance from hence, escorted by four thousand lances, with eighteen waggons full of gold. Will you that I should have the lady and sixteen waggons of gold; or will you that she pass and we lose beauty and booty?'

"'The lady and the gold—the lady and the gold!' exclaimed every voice with acclamation.

"'Up then, and arm! Brace on your harness of iron, saddle your horses, and let us conquer the lady and the gold with our sharp lances,' cried Bras-de-fer.

"Two hours after, the lady's guard of four thousand lances lay dead upon their road to Mons. The waggons of gold were turned towards the castle, and a knight all red with blood opened the litter of the beautiful widow, saying:—'Madam, behold your husband, Baldwin Bras-de-fer, count of Flanders.'"

"Indeed, that was dreadful!" said Matilda.

"Dreadful!" echoed the nurse.

"It is said that Bras-de-fer died in this room, and his body lay in state; but next morning, when the guards entered the room it was gone; and a smell of sulphur remained. No one ever slept here since, until we came, and strange noises have I heard— Santa Maria! what is that?"

"I heard none," said Matilda.

"What is shining so on the table at the other end of the room?" exclaimed Gertrude.

"That is my father's helmet; he left it here when he returned from his ride."

The bell of the church tolled midnight.

"Heaven defend me!" cried the old woman, "it moves!"

"Holy Virgin! but it does move!" ejaculated Matilda, growing pale; "it shakes!"

The helmet *did* move upon the table with great agitation and noise. Gertrude shrieked, Matilda trembled, and said a Paternoster. The helmet became still.

Digitized by Google

"Good Gertrude be silent!" whispered Matilda. "God protects us—I will see the cause. This cross in my hand protects me surely against the malignant spirit. I have done no evil. I will go!"

Gertrude was unable to speak or move; Matilda seized the helmet by the crest, and out leaped a large rat, which had entered, seeking crumbs of bread strewed on the table, and was entrapped by the visor falling. The animal's appearance did not at all abate the fears of Gertrude.

"Jesu! Maria!" she exclaimed, and fell on her knees.

"Why Gertrude, what frightens you?—'twas only a rat!"

"Holy Virgin!—only a rat! only a rat! It was the foul fiend, or the spirit of Bras-de-fer. Oh dear! it is a sad omen. Some evil awaits us! Bras-de-fer was just such a one as the wicked Count Geoffrey, and this dark spirit has got into your room, and into your father's helmet, which shows that some plan of the fiend's will direct your father's counsels. Dear, good young lady, don't consent to anything your father says for seven days, seven hours, and seven minutes!"

"Then," said Matilda, "you would have me do wrong for seven days; and out of fear of the devil forget to fear God."

"Well then, tell the earl what has happened, or a spell of evil will be on this house and upon you."

The old lady again crossed herself, and said, "Let us go to bed; but I shall not sleep this blessed night."

"Never fear, good Gertrude, we will pray, and our prayers will chase these false spirits away; besides it is now past midnight, and after one they must depart."

Saying this she began to undress, and after some more conversation upon this awful subject, they prayed fervently and in great agitation; for though the Lady Matilda was very religious, she too much despised these signs of evil, which contempt I do not hold to be excusable; yet the nurse's fears affected her greatly.

Next morning the earl of Flanders was awakened by a gentle tap at his chamber door, which he knew to be his fair daughter's.

"Enter, Matilda," said he, "you are early."

"Yes father, for I have had a restless night."

Digitized by Google

She recounted the story of the rat, which discomposed the earl. "For well do all men know," said Sir William, "that the foul fiend takes strange shapes, and a good man should always be on his guard against the attacks of the evil one. William the Conqueror was to blame for not heeding these things; he had no fear of, nor belief in such awful appearances, which however forerun events, as dark clouds proclaim the coming tempest."

Earl Baldwin was not of the opinion which Duke William entertained; on the contrary, boy, he was brave and good, and very pious; and he well knew that the devil employs sorcerers and witches as his agents in this wicked world. He was, therefore, greatly disturbed, and sent for his almoner, a man of great piety, who had educated the Lady Matilda, and in a great measure governed the good earl: in truth he governed all Flanders.

"Boniface," said the earl, "Matilda has been disturbed by portents, and a strange matter; and I, too, am uneasy."

The good old lord then described how the rat had moved the helmet.

"Holy Virgin defend my house!" he exclaimed; "this rat does not, to my mind, augur evil to it from any project of mine, but from some armed man, and the count's late expression of anger comes home to me—we must be prepared."

"I hold your opinion, good sir earl; but we will first try to catch the rat and kill it; if we can do that, then may we be sure it was neither the devil nor Bras-de-fer. I will wrap some cheese up in the leaf of a holy book, and if the foul spirit have put on the shape of a rat, he will not approach the cheese. As to old Bras-de-fer, he was ever too cautious a warrior to be caught in a trap while alive, and assuredly will possess equal sagacity now that he is a spirit. But," added the holy man, "let me caution you, good sir earl, against the count of Anjou; for I have heard strange stories of his threats against you, and all men know his deeds; beware of him, for I fear me he is too potent for us to catch and deal with as we will with the poor rat."

"Holy father, I thank you. You give me comfort. As to the count of Anjou, Earl Baldwin fears no man; we can protect our daughter and ourself."

Digitized by Google

Here the earl looked dignified, grave, and very courageous, for he felt somewhat piqued at the reverend father saying the count of Anjou was so potent.

Boniface bowed respectfully, assenting, but said :—

"Noble earl, all men know the power of the brave Baldwin of Flanders, who defies the emperor of Germany; but still let us be watchful. The noble lion, monarch of the forest and unmatched in strength, has still eyes; without them, his strength would avail but little. The eyes see evil, the brain judges how to deal with it, and courage dares to meet it. All these perform their functions, most noble earl, ere the lion uses his strength. And in like manner must we guard against the count of Anjou, his wickedness and his wiles. He is like the tiger, fierce, cunning, and merciless.

"I see much that should warn us in this matter. It is the Lady Matilda's good genius which, under God, has pointed out to you that the strength of the iron helm is useless without care and cunning. The rat entered and ate the crumbs, despite of the strength of your helmet which covered them, and then escaped by the carelessness of the damsel. Your helmet designates your power, the crumbs your family, the bold robber rat the count of Anjou; his escape, when in our power, warns you to be cautious and decisive. Let us beware; keep your head within the helmet, your lance in your hand—and, as you know your enemy, strike him at once."

"I acknowledge the wisdom of your counsel, which gives me both joy and comfort, holy father. I will be carefully on my defence."

"The best defence," rejoined the chaplain, "is a prompt attack. The count rides often insultingly within your territory, often slenderly attended. His knights and men-at-arms are not attached to him, they serve him against the grain, because of their poverty; whereas your followers are strong and faithful; let the first of these rides be the last—rude visitors need rude reception. I will show you how to deal with the rat; so deal thou with Geoffrey if thou canst. Come now with me, fair princess," continued the priest, addressing Matilda, "and I will convince you that the rat is not the devil."

Digitized by Google

"By the holy cross thy words are wise," said Baldwin, as his companions left him.

"Dear lady," said Boniface to Matilda, "do not think ill of me that I have advised your father to deal harshly with that reckless count. When knaves have great power, the most effectual dealing is the wisest, and also the most righteous. This villanous count of Anjou is a curse to the country, and must be destroyed, if we can destroy him, as we would a wolf, which is a much more innocuous animal. As for the rat, take no fear on his account, poor little animal; he is neither a demon nor a ghost, but just a rat, and we will catch him. Yet, fair damsel, think not I treat lightly those strange appearances of which your good father stands greatly in awe—and he is right so to do. Sorcerers and witches no doubt there are; many parts of the Old and New Testaments confirm this; and he who believes in the will believe in the other. But our judgment must be employed. Now, this same judgment or reason is God's gift, and we should so use it as to distinguish real sorceries from idle fears. When we feel the last, we must cast them away as tools of the devil. When we perceive the first, namely, some actual supernatural appearance, or some being who deals with the Evil One, we should first shun its presence; if that be not in our power, our next step is to dare it, and be confident that God and our Saviour, and the Holy Virgin, guard us and can save, being more powerful than all the demons. We must use our wits against the wicked as far as we have power, and then trust to God."

Saying this he took some cheese from a cupboard, and went with a trap to Gertrude's room.

"Peace and good health be with you, Gertrude."

"Holy father, it comforts me to see you; I am ill at rest in this chamber." Here the old lady stopped her wheel, and compressing her lips, shook her grey head, casting her eyes to heaven.

"What, Gertrude! have you no faith in the Holy Church and its ministers? Shame woman, shame!"

"Yes I have, to be sure, to be sure I have! But have you no fear of the devil, father?

Digitized by Google

"Yes woman," replied Boniface, rather thrown off his guard by the suddenness of the question.

"Well, so have I, and not the less for his being in shape of a rat; so you need not taunt me with want of faith. Marry come up, indeed!" and the angry old woman's wheel whirled with violence.

"Well, well, Gertrude, this fiend shall be caught withal," and he explained his project. The wheel stopped, and the priest set his trap.

"Now let the spell work. If there is aught devilish, it will depart. If not, then the rat is a rat, and we will have him." They had scarce left the chamber when the trap was heard to fall.

"Ah, hah! a rat, and a hungry one, by the mass!" and as Boniface reopened the door, the earl came to seek his helmet.

"Here, earl of Flanders; here is the count of Anjou for you. Shall we let this rat loose, or not?" and Boniface laughed aloud.

"No. Why should you let him loose?"

"Why did you let the count of Anjou loose when he came slenderly attended on to your domains? He is like the rat, but far more harmful."

"What would you have me do, priest?"

"Do! why justice, most noble Baldwin! The rat has done no greater harm than frightening Gertrude. We have frightened him; let his punishment end." So saying he let the rat go.

"Poor thing!" said Matilda; "it only wanted food."

"Not so," replied Gertrude, "it might have contained the Evil One in its body."

"Noble Baldwin, you see the rat has been treated justly; do thou the same with the count of Anjou. He is a robber, a murderer, a dishonourer of helpless maidens, who are carried off by him and never more heard of. Let justice be done. You have strong traps for such accursed rats. Give him to me to shrive, and inquire no more."

"Be it so, when he is caught."

"By the mass, sir earl, that I grant is no easy job. But lose no time: he loses none."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIII.

Knights rude to girls, act ever worser,
If a maid squeaks, they always curse her.

WHAT now was the count of Anjou about? We left him riding home in great dudgeon, scheming vengeance, and intent to carry off the Lady Matilda; doubting whether to force her into a marriage or to send her back dishonoured. In either case he purposed, with the help of the German emperor, to defy Baldwin of Flanders and William of Normandy; for this count of Anjou was full of courage, though devoid of honour, and dreadfully cruel to all who fell into his power.

About a week had passed when, late at night, a spy reached his castle, and was instantly ushered to his lord, who was drinking with a hedge priest, the great pander to his criminal pursuits.

"Well Hubert! what news?"

"The news is good. The Lady Matilda rides forth to-morrow with slight escort, to take the diversion of hawking. She may easily be carried off, unless that accursed priest Boniface—I crave pardon, holy father," turning to the hedge priest—"unless that accursed Boniface turns her from the sport. I heard him say, 'Good earl, take heed that the maiden be well attended. I like not these excursions when bad men are in the neighbourhood. Recollect the rat is not yet in the trap—neither is Geoffrey Martel.'"

"Ha! said he so? Then the tonsured villain lays some plan for me. But he shall find a rat that bites hard ere it is caught. That gownsman has thwarted me a thousand times; but, by the hoof of the devil, he shall some day shrive himself, and then leap from the highest tower of this castle!"

"And well will he merit it!" said the squint-eyed, red-faced hedge-priest; "for why should our cloth meddle with

Digitized by Google

temporal affairs? We are taught to obey the powers of the state, and of course to second the wishes of our feudal lords."

"At what hour does the lady go forth, Hubert?"

"At ten o'clock, sir count, an it please you."

"Good! Send Pecquigny to me."

That subtle director of all the count's plans quickly appeared.

"Pecquigny, we must mount to-morrow betimes. The Lady Matilda is at last likely to be in my power. Pick out a train of ten men-at-arms, with Sir Baudric, Sir Marley, and four more knights; that will do, for Hubert says she will have but a poor train."

"Best riding by night," said Pecquigny. "But be it as you will: let us start by daybreak."

Next morning all were in complete armour and on horseback, proceeding along the road by which they were to reach the spot proposed for an ambuscade. The count and Pecquigny were a little in front.

"There goes one of my horse's shoes," said Marley.

"That's bad," answered Baudric.

"Not so bad neither," replied the other, as he dismounted; "I see it on the ground, close behind."

"That's good," said Baudric.

"Not so good neither, master, for I have no nails."

"That's bad."

"Not so bad neither, for I see the nails are all in the shoe."

"Well then, sulky devil that you are!" said Baudric, "that you will allow is good."

"No I won't, for I have ne'er a hammer."

"There, discontented caitiff! take that then;" and Baudric took a small hammer attached to the pommel of his saddle, and hurled it in jest at his comrade. The hammer hit Marley's helmet, and glanced off, striking his horse a sharp blow on the head; the animal turned round, and went off full gallop.

"Curse your silly tricks, Baudric," said Marley, furiously, "there is a pretty job; I shall not be able to catch that galliard this week."

Digitized by Google

"I'll catch him for you, man," answered his good-humoured companion, and set off after the runaway horse.

The party rode on, and Marley sat down by the road-side.

Baudric had not ridden far when he beheld a knight, who was coming after them leisurely, and who, seeing the horse furiously galloping, caught it by the bridle. This knight was clad in sorry armour, and attended by a squire not less meanly accoutred, but he was a raw-boned man withal.

"Thanks sir knight for your courtesy," said Sir Baudric, as he took Marley's horse from this knight of the shabby armour.

"Welcome, sir, and no great courtesy after all. Is your companion hurt by the fall, and got he thrown by accident, or by a strong lance?"

"Neither, sir knight; the horse had lost a shoe, the knight dismounted, and the animal took fright."

"You seem bent upon some adventure, being in company, and many if my sight be correct; for I saw a party from the hill behind, which I take to be yours."

"Yes, we are upon some adventure. Our leader, the count of Anjou, has some work for us, but what it is we know not exactly. In truth we are needy men, and do more from necessity than we much relish. This count of Anjou often quits his province to visit the castles that he possesses in this neighbourhood; on these occasions we sally forth on predatory expeditions, when he carries off some maiden, and we gain a few byzants to pay us for our help. He seldom discovers himself—we pass for robbers; and in sooth we do a good deal of business in that way, for it must be confessed we are not over scrupulous. I should not wonder if we have some tough job in hand now, for we were told it may call for stout hearts."

"Ha!" quoth the rusty knight, "it must be some surprise, for your numbers could hardly venture an open attack against a powerful chief."

"Even so: and I should not be surprised if it were to carry off some damsel of quality; for, as I before said, a woman is generally the object of our leader's exploits, and we form to-day a stronger party than he usually rides with."

"It must assuredly be as you conjecture. Your chief, no

Digitized by Google

doubt, proposes to add another odalisque to the harem which I have heard he maintains at his strong and lonely castle in Artois. It is bruited that many fair dames and gentle damsels groan there in hopeless captivity and dishonour."

"Even so, sir knight: and truly these unhappy ladies suffer great wrong; for when the count grows weary of their society, Pecquigny so treats them that they soon disappear; the moat is deep, so are the dungeons; and it is said that there is one through which the waters of the river forming the moat pass. Of this dungeon, the entrance is like a funnel from above, and the mouth thereof is in a closet in Pecquigny's room. The river flows away from the castle, out of a cavern; to that cavern wolves often come, and no one dare attack them, for in that respect the count's orders are express. Now it is supposed that these ravenous beasts are useful to the castellan and to Pecquigny; for that many a poor girl is sent down the funnel from Pecquigny's closet to look if a wolf be there or not; and, to make sure of a *tête-à-tête*, Pecquigny, as men say, drops them down head foremost! From time to time some of my companions have heard strange shrieks on nights, when the wind blowed, and the storm raged, and thunder rolled. One of us, named Bertram, resolved upon a time to look into the cavern, against the orders of the count; the sentinel saw him, and called out to Pecquigny, who watched the man, and on his return called this imprudent fellow to his room. No man saw Bertram more; but next day Pecquigny asked for him, and when we said he had strangely disappeared, 'Oh,' said the sieur, 'I suppose he is gone to look at the cave again. That cavern is a strange place, comrades. An old witch once told me that whoever looked into it once was sure to go again; for such is the enchantment of it, that none are satisfied with one visit.' We all pretty well understood what Pecquigny meant, so no one troubles his head about the cave, or the wolves—or Pecquigny's room either. None go into the last but the woman who attends upon him. They say she was his mother's midwife, and I have no doubt she was; the old hag, I suppose, repents having brought the youth into the world, and hopes to make amends by helping his troublesome dames out of it."

Digitized by Google

The shabby knight mused long after this tale, but at last breaking silence said,

"I am poor and strong; perhaps I could be of use, and not being scrupulous, mayhap your leader would reward me according to my services?"

"Why, for the matter of that," replied Baudric, "a free conscience and a strong arm is just what he likes; and if that be your tune, even sing your song to him, he will listen."

They had now reached the party, and Baudric riding up to the count of Anjou, told him what the shabby knight had said.

"By our Lady! a comely knight, which is more than I can say of his armour," said the count. "Sir knight, I pray your ear for a while."

The shabby knight closed up alongside of the chief, who continued—

"Gentle sir, I crave pardon, many a stout heart beats under a shabby cuirass, and many a weak vant-brace covers a strong arm. Your harness is shabby, and in my castle many good suits of armour hang idle for want of brave knights to fill them. If you will join my band do so. We live a merry life; what the wise ones called wicked; but, by my troth it is a pleasant one, and we have a priest to shrive us withal, when need there be. All I ask is a stiff lance and a pliable conscience—a man that will do my work, ask no questions, and leave the devil and me to settle the account between us. What say you, sir knight?"

The shabby knight answered calmly,

"As to the lance, sir count, it depends on the arm that uses it, and that again upon the courage. The outward man you may judge of, the inward man you may try when it seems meet unto thee, and occasion serves. As to my conscience, it sits as easy as if it belonged to a bishop. For yourself and the devil, in God's name, settle your private affairs betwixt you; I never interfere in family quarrels, being neither clerk, lawyer, nor priest. Bid me do a knight's work, and if you don't like my lance we can cry quits; but by the mass, the man who rides me down will be neither

Digitized by Google

weak nor fearful. If you like me, take me; but I must be free to part company at my own pleasure."

"*Mort de ma vie!* but you talk boldly," said the count, "and rather more free than I like; but follow me, and you shall have such guerdon as you merit—women and welcome. Gold and good cheer are to be found at my castle, or it may be a halter, with an elevated view of the country from the battlements—none succeed better on a single rope than those I teach to dance."

"Agreed, sir count. I abide thy bargain—a girl or a gallows. The first at my own choice, the last at yours, though I doubt much whether the hemp is yet sown that is to make me a halter."

"Your words are hardy," quoth the count; "but I agree, and the bargain is made. Join my people, sir knight, for the sieur Pecquigny and I have need of converse; ere long we shall prove your mettle."

"That is easily done," said the rusty knight, as he turned his horse, and the rest joined him.

"Welcome comrade," said Marley, who had now joined. "Have you any oil in your pocket to grease your conscience? The count can't bear one that creaks."

"No!" said he of the shabby armour, "or else my harness would be brighter; but I'll tell you what I have, sir saucy—an arm that will make you both creaking and greasy enough, if I hear any more of your jokes."

"Come come, companion, let this drop, we shall have work on our hands in ten minutes. Don't let a joke breed a quarrel. I meant not to anger you."

"Nor did you. But, considering our acquaintance is so short, I thought your wit might be spared. However, I see you are a galliard, and one of merriment, so we are all friends again."

"Ay, ay! all as smooth as the oil that your armour wants," said Marley, laughing, "and smoother a good deal than the basting you threatened me with. But come, tell us your name, like a good fellow; mine is Marley, and I have a right to ask yours."

"No!" replied the stranger, drily; "I am under a vow

Digitized by Google

not to tell my name for a certain space; you shall know it in time. In the interim call me 'the rusty knight' to commemorate your joke and our good fellowship."

As they said this the count led them into a small wood, in which was a dell that concealed the whole band. Here we shall leave them, and speak of the Lady Matilda.

CHAPTER XIV.

Tells of hawks, and eke of hounds,
Of frighten'd damsels, and of wounds.

A FEW days before the morning on which the count of Anjou sallied forth with his troop of devilish spirits, the fair Matilda asked her father, Earl Baldwin, for leave to take out his falcons and disport herself. The good earl consented.

"But take," said he, "a dozen gendarmes with you, besides your party of companions; for though I hear that the count of Anjou has left Artois, and returned to his own province, I am always fearful of his bravoes who live in the castle, and at times vex the county. For be assured, girl, that those who pass for robbers, and who so harass the Flemings, are every one of them in his pay."

The damsel assured her father that she would be cautious. Then with a few ladies, a large retinue of gentlemen unarmed, except with swords, and four gendarmes, she sallied forth on the morning that our band issued from the castle, in consequence of the information which the count had received.

"The day bids fair for the sport, lady," said a gentleman of her suite.

"Yes!" answered Matilda, "and so your hawk seems to think, she bates so violently; but mine is lazy, and jouks."

"Rouse her, lady," responded the cavalier; "she will soon mantle and warble, I'll warrant her, for she is a fine falcon."

"Yes, verily," said the falconer; "as fine a short-winged bird as ever obeyed the lure; she is generally mettlesome

Digitized by Google

enough. Heaven send that her jouking bodes us no evil, lady."

"Amen!" cried Matilda, somewhat startled. "I certainly never saw a goshawk so sluggish before. She was given to me by my brother-in-law, Earl Tostig, who brought her from the north of Ireland, so famous for hawks. She binds well, and usually bates and crabs."

"Ay," rejoined the falconer, "and what a stoop she makes. I never saw her rake since we had her; and it is worth riding a hundred miles to see her cancelier—she is a perfect make-hawk."

He had scarcely made the remark, when a large mallard rose from an adjoining marshy spot, and again alighted. Matilda gave her favourite hawk to the falconer, who loosed her jesses, and unhooded her, and during these operations the goshawk roused; whereupon the falconer whistled her off his wrist. She rose with a whirr, her blewits tinkled as she gracefully flew circling round Matilda's head, and when the dogs put up the mallard a second time, she soared high, darting through the ambient air like a boy's kite rising aloft to the wind. All now put their horses to full speed, looking up after the gos-hawk.

"How beautifully she soars," said Matilda.

"She stoops! she stoops!" cried one of the sportsmen.

"Look," said another, "how she canceliers."

"She pounces; and has struck the quarry, by Jove!" called out a third.

"Brava! brava!" was re-echoed by many voices, as the gallant bird, trussing the mallard, fell tumbling to the earth in mortal strife, with the prey in her talons. The poor mallard was still alive, and Matilda, pitying its agonies, ordered it to be set free, to the great displeasure of her falconer.

Just then the party regained the road.

"Hark! what loud whistle is that that I hear, far before us in the wood?" said the Lady Matilda, suddenly checking her horse.

It was the hedge-priest who acted as scout for the ambuscade on the occasion, and who, seeing the company, made a signal to the count of Anjou that the party approached.

Digitized by Google

"It was only that shaveling on the hill in our front," answered one of the retinue; and the company again proceeded. The Lady Matilda rode in front, surrounded by many of the gentlemen. The rest rode with her female companions, at a small distance in the rear, while the attendants closed the train; and among them were the four gendarmes, well accoutred for battle.

When the count of Anjou perceived the signal of the scout priest, he turned to the ambuscade, and said in a stern and decided voice,

"In the troop which now approaches us, for I hear the priest's signal, is the Lady Matilda of Flanders. She must be taken. Leave her to me. Your business is to overthrow all who resist."

The men, who had all alighted, now tightened their saddle-girths, mounted, and prepared for the fight, yet with sinking hearts, for they knew their cause was bad.

Scarcely had Matilda and her retinue entered the wood when the ambush set upon them.

"Gentlemen, strike not unarmed men with the points of your lances," cried aloud the rusty knight, as they surrounded the party. The attendants of the lady, seeing the force opposed to them, made no resistance. The gentlemen, indeed, pretended to draw their swords, but were in an instant disarmed; upon which they turned their horses' heads, and fled at full speed to obtain assistance.

The men-at-arms seeing that their leaders had abandoned their lovely mistress, also quitted the field without striking a blow.

"Curse on the cowards," said the rusty knight, murmuring to himself between his teeth, with scarcely suppressed rage; "had they stood their grouud, I would have saved her."

The count had previously prepared a strong and active man, without armour and on foot, who, when the scuffle began, leaped on the palfrey of Matilda, and throwing his arms around her waist, seized the reins which had previously been laid hold of by the count of Anjou: thus they went off with her at full speed, the count and another armed knight riding on each side of the lady.

Digitized by Google

Pecquigny covered the retreat, having pillaged such of the lady's escort as he and his companions could lay hold of, and in all ways endeavoured to make them suppose they had been attacked by an ordinary band of robbers. Indeed, so great was the confusion of these followers and their anxiety for their own safety, that none perceived what had become of their mistress. They knew not whether she had fled, or had been carried off a prisoner.

Pecquigny and his companions now pursued the steps of their master at full speed. The rusty knight and his esquire closely followed the count.

"I will keep near you, sir count," said he, "for if you were to be attacked, you might yet lose your prize."

"Right, companion," replied Anjou. "On, on!" added he, addressing the man who was mounted behind the Lady Matilda. "Spur, spur your jade, varlet, or the rescue will be upon us ere we reach the castle!" Then with a mild voice he continued, "Be tranquil, lady, I mean no evil to you, and resistance is in vain."

"Yes," said Matilda, "I see it is. When fate places me in the hands of ruffians, a poor woman has no power to resist. Three knights against one unfortunate woman who is a prisoner. But I can die, ruffian! God will protect the innocence of an unhappy woman against such brutes. And think not, hateful and most hated count of Anjou, that I will ever be your wife, for to make me that I suppose is your project; but my father and William of Normandy will avenge me."

"William of Normandy!" said the knight, laughing loud and scornfully—"that young imp is your knight, is he? Would he were here, and I'd send the boy and your hopes sprawling in the dust together. No, lady; neither your father nor the Norman baby shall save you, or even know what has become of you till I mould you to my will, by foul means if fair fail."

"Never, count of Anjou. Matilda of Flanders may die under the cruelty of a traitor and a miscreant, but she will not live unworthy of herself and of her rank. My person is in your power, but my will is my own; and know, traitor, that God defends the innocent, and the guilty are often

Digitized by Google

struck down in the midst of their imagined success. I am not yours—I never will be yours! God! O God protect me! Sir knight, sir knight! have you the heart of a man?" cried she despairingly to the stranger in rusty armour, who appeared insensible to the appeal; "will you not aid a woman? Merciful and holy Mother of God, protect and save me from these monsters!"

Here a flow of tears followed, and seemed to relieve her from a degree of excitement that bordered on madness.

"A wild bird you have caged, sir count!" said the sieur Pecquigny; "but I think I have seen many a one tamed at the castle who showed as much fight as this hen."

"Speak respectfully, varlet," answered the count, "the Lady Matilda is not to be mine *pour amours;* she shall be the countess of Anjou when it pleases her."

"Then never!" said Matilda. "Holy Virgin protect me!" Here her tears flowed fast; the horseman could hardly hold her, for her struggles had been so violent that he was fatigued.

"Can't you hold her?" asked the count.

"Hardly, sir."

"I will relieve you," said the rusty knight, "if so it pleases the count; both myself and my horse are powerful, and the lady is like a feather."

"Do so." In an instant the lady was transferred by the man who held her from her own palfrey to that of the rusty knight, who had several times almost given way to his desire to take her part and attack the two knights; but his intent to save the lady made him act with prudence; for it was evident that the horseman who held the lady, would, while the knight engaged his foes, have carried her off, so that even victory might not save her; and how was he to hope for victory when the strong body of attendants were close behind, and would be upon him ere he could strike a second blow? He had, however, planned his scheme for saving the daughter of the potent earl of Flanders, and, being a Norman knight, his eagerness in the lady's defence was no doubt whetted by finding that she loved the duke of Normandy, to whom her safety would be highly accept-

Digitized by Google

able. He therefore resolved that nothing should divert him from his plan.

The lady was now fairly seated; his arm held her firmly round the waist, and they again moved as rapidly forward as, under such circumstances, it was practicable to do. At a turning of the road the count slackened his pace to speak to Pecquigny, which removed him to a little distance, while the other knight and the man were a little in advance.

"Lady I am your friend—fear not," whispered the rusty knight; "but we must dissemble, or all will be lost."

"I faint!" replied Matilda. The knight pressed her closely.

"Cheer up, lady, no harm shall happen to you;" then turning to the count, he said, "I fear the lady faints; we had better slacken our speed, and stop for a few minutes." He drew up, and the count brought some water in his helmet, which they sprinkled in her face, and she revived.

"I am well again," said Matilda, "as well as I can be in the hands of traitors; but I shall be revenged on you all!" She pressed the hand of her secret protector, who felt her whole person tremble.

They reached the count's castle, the drawbridge was lowered, passed, again pulled up, and the Lady Matilda carried to a remote tower.

"By our Lady," said the rusty knight, "but you have done your job in a masterly manner, count; but I am sorry we were obliged to let her female attendants escape; I should have liked to have carried them off too; however, the chief's affairs must be attended to first. I hope those fellows pillaged the lady's attendants well, for in truth my purse is not full, sir count."

"Never mind, Sir Rusty, as that is the name by which you choose to be called, no knight of mine is poor long, and you shan't be the first: meantime share my purse," said he, putting it into the knight's hand; "we are here companions in all things."

"Except the Lady Matilda," answered Rusty Armour, laughing. "You chiefs always get the best of the booty; but after all, that is fair, for you have all the expense, and

Digitized by Google

most of the risk; however, count, I think you have now the measure of my conscience, and will trust me in future."

"By my troth, yes!" replied the leader, "you have played your part well, and I have more work for you. I can't keep this nightingale to sing in my cage; I cannot stand against the earl of Flanders, and mean to deny that the lady is in my keeping. I will throw open my castle to his search, but will send her off forthwith to a place more suited to my designs. We have come here by a road little frequented and unseen. Pecquigny prepares a close litter; you and the others can guard it at a distance; now she must take refreshment."

Saying this, he went to the chamber of the Lady Matilda—

"Fair damsel you must eat, for you have a journey to take. In this castle you must not remain. Your father will suspect me, and I am not prepared to stand a siege from one so powerful. I can hold you my prisoner on cheaper terms; neither he, nor any but those I can trust, shall know the place of your sojourn, so take refreshment, for you depart from hence in a few minutes."

Saying these words he left her.

Matilda was young and timid; but her timidity sprang from a nervous anxiety, not cowardice; and her courage in this great peril burst forth like a lustrous moon breaking through dark clouds. From her high rank she knew the gravity of the occasion, and that the earl of Flanders' daughter could not disappear like the women of those who dared not be too inquisitive when their families were outraged by a great feudal chief. She knew also that a friend and protector, bold, strong, and cautious, was near her; and to one of her sanguine and romantic spirit, this alone was sufficient to bear her up. To him she now looked for her safety, so far as human means could save: but Matilda had in her thoughts a greater protector than the rusty knight. She had been taught to confide in God! To believe that his arm was everywhere and omnipotent; that in the hands of the detestable count of Anjou she was as safe, if safety was to be her fate, as in her father's palace; and if her doom was dishonour and death, she believed that all the potentates of

Digitized by Google

Europe could not save her. Boniface, her preceptor, had taught her unlimited confidence in the Deity.

"And it is now," said she to herself, "that his precepts are to be put into practice. What are doctrines, if not to be called into action and serve us in life? Are we to preach charity, and yet hoard riches; to preach virtue, and yet be abandoned; to preach trust in God and hope in our Saviour, and yet tremble when in the hands of the wicked? Are they more potent than the God who made and who judges them? If I believe this, I must trust to him—he who walked upon the waves, who stilled the tempest, who fed the multitude, who raised the dead—'O ye of little faith,' said he to the sinking apostle; and shall I, if I have faith, not have aid? Do I not need it more than an apostle, being but a weak woman, and in greater peril? What are the waves to this merciless and abandoned man? Almighty God protect me; for in thee and in thy divine Son do I put my trust! And have I not already had aid and comfort and great support in this hour? Has not a protector suddenly—yea, miraculously appeared in the person of this rusty knight, who seems not to be one of the horrid band? Was it not God who sent him, and will not the same God give him strength and wisdom to save me?"

Her soliloquy was interrupted by the count, who again entered, but her mind was calm and concentrated.

"You have not eaten, lady."

"Traitor!" said Matilda, haughtily, "I have been praying to my God and your God; he who can and will protect me! I am composed, and will eat, that I may thereby acquire greater strength to make that determined resistance to you on which my mind is resolutely bent; and I well know that courage is sustained by food."

Saying this, she ate of the food before her, and was elated by a degree of confidence that in some measure confounded her tyrant. However, it was not the confusion produced by compunction, pity, or admiration, but a momentary feeling of disappointment. He had expected to enjoy her tears, her misery, her terror; and lo! she was proud, and of unshaken resolution. No wailings, no supplications for mercy excited his base desires, such as he had been accustomed to in his

Digitized by Google

dealings with the unhappy females whom he had so often sacrificed to his unbridled course of infamy. Habit had in him created a zest for the misery of those who were his victims: the misery which, in a less hardened villain, would have raised feelings of compunction, in the count only heightened enjoyment, and added to excitement. He was disappointed and abashed by the haughty demeanour of Matilda, but his disappointment was transient.

"You are in my power, lady," said he, with a smile of contempt and obdurate insolence, which seemed to tell her that his feelings were untouched by compassion or fear, or any other passions than those of revenge and voluptuousness. There are hypocrites who bear a pure appearance to the eye of the world; they clothe the outward man in the garment of religion, as the frozen earth is clothed with unsullied snow; but beneath there lurks a stony hardness of filth—of all that is sterile and offensive. Such men are dangerous as hidden rocks; but the count had cast away the thoughts of such concealment; he was free at least from the vice of hypocrisy; he entered openly into the service of hell; he was the avowed soldier of the evil spirit. He defied God and man, and set no bounds to his wickedness but the bounds of impotence.

Determined to conceal Matilda for the reason he gave to her, namely, that he feared her father, she would be in a secret prison at his mercy, and her terror would enhance his revenge and his enjoyment.

"You are in my power, Matilda; and the only choice you have is between being cast off when I shall be tired of you, or marrying me. If the latter, you will avoid all the suffering that I will otherwise inflict; for indignity upon indignity shall be heaped on you. If you contemn my honourable offer of marriage, I have the right, the will, and the power to take a full revenge. The count of Flanders shall never hear of you more. I have a place of confinement which none can discover but those who accompany us, and those I will instantly kill as they come out of the dungeon where they lodge you. No trace, no witness of the transaction, or of your existence, will remain. Tell this to them if you please; none will believe it! none will think me silly enough

Digitized by Google

to divulge an intention so black as to destroy these men merely to conceal your place of concealment. Tell them, and they will only laugh! Your fate is dismal and hopeless if you refuse me—honourable and equal to your rank, if you consent to be my wife. But mistress or wife you shall be, before three days pass. Now lady descend with me, the litter waits, and we must depart at once; but ere we go understand me," and his ferocity of look made Matilda's heart sink within her, "if you attempt to scream while in the litter, I will place this gag in your mouth." He showed the horrid instrument which he held in his hand; adding, "I am too deeply engaged to stop at any measure, and if other means fail, I will plunge my dagger into your heart. Your father shall not have you back unless as my wife.

"Your life is nothing to me; I have destroyed plenty of other women to conceal such transactions, though little danger to me could accrue if the facts were known, for my power is far too great to give the slightest hopes to their friends of revenging either their dishonour or their deaths. To slay them was an easier way to get rid of them and their wailings than any other, and so I slew them. Your friends would be too powerful for me; therefore my own safety demands that I should deny having any knowledge of you. 'Tis true that all my people know it, but they know that if I fall, they also would be pursued, sooner or later, by the vengeance of your father; they would, therefore, be silent as the grave. If any should turn traitor, my answer would be, 'It is false, I have her not; find her if ye can. There are my castles; let them be searched.' The spot where I mean to hide the Princess Matilda is safe from all discovery, and they who accompany us there shall be as secret as the grave can make them, for into it they shall fall the instant you are lodged in the dungeon I have prepared. One woman alone shall approach you; she has had many a fair prisoner before. She knows her trade. She is deaf, dumb, and almost blind. No one can communicate with her; you will see none other, and her very rarely. Consider now this situation; if you accept me, we move not from hence, and our nuptials shall take place in an hour. Speak!"

Digitized by Google

"Never, monster—come what will. I trust to a mightier arm than yours; there is no dungeon so deep that he cannot see the bottom, no crime so great that he cannot punish. Monster! you are in greater peril than Matilda. I hate, abhor, and defy you! Lead on—do as you please with this weak and miserable body; the mind of Matilda you can neither bend nor break. I trust to God, and in his mighty hands is my fate. To powerful mortal hands has he committed my protection—hands weak in themselves, but powerful as his instruments! To Baldwin earl of Flanders and William duke of Normandy I look with confidence; they are, ere this, at work for my liberation; and, guided by Heaven, will detect and crush the infamous count of Anjou. Lead on, detestable man! again and again I defy you, supported by my innocence and my hopes of God's assistance."

The count of Anjou had been little used to such defiance; he trembled with fury, and, seizing her arm with so rude a grasp that it made her cry out, he dragged her down the stairs.

"She-devil! I'll make you suffer for this," said he, almost choked with passion.

In an instant she was in the close covered litter; but not till she had seen the rusty knight, his strong squire, Sir Baudric, and two men-at-arms ready to attend her. As she passed them, being still wound up by excitement to a feeling of enthusiasm, she said,

"Minions of a villain, tremble! Flanders and Normandy will avenge me; your doom is sealed if you do not save yourselves by saving me. The count meditates your death to conceal my imprisonment."

Anjou pushed her into the litter, and leaping on his horse, which stood ready caparisoned, away they went at a rapid pace, whenever the nature of the country admitted of it. They had not, however, long continued their progress when they reached a pass where the litter could scarcely move, the horses drawing it with extreme difficulty, and, from the great length of this bad piece of road, there was every prospect of its continuance for half an hour.

"On, on, caitiff," said the count; "thrash your brutes, and make them lay well to their work."

Digitized by Google

"I doubt, sir knight," said the postilion, "that we shall overturn or break down the vehicle if I push the horses faster till we pass this slough, for there are deep holes, into which, if the nags fall, we shall have worse speed, or more likely no speed at all."

The rusty knight, who had been for a few moments whispering to his squire, suddenly said,

"Now is our time! we are two to four, the carriage can't escape, and I think our victory is certain; we could unhorse a dozen, if her safety was not in question."

Saying this, and followed by his squire, the rusty knight pushed his charger ahead of the carriage, then, turning round with his spear in the rest, he cried to the driver,

"Stop! move not, or you die!" then he cried with a voice of thunder, "By the splendour of God, thou caitiff! William of Normandy will now make thee bite the dust; set your lance and do battle; my agreement was a girl or the gallows,—the first at my choice, the last at thine. I have chosen, and demand the lady, so defend thyself."

"Traitor!" cried the astonished Anjou, as he couched his spear.

"*Dex, aie!*" shouted William and his squire Taillefer, as they charged, and headlong from their saddles fell Anjou and Baudric to the ground, one on each side of the litter, while passing onwards, the Norman knights beat down the two men-at-arms who were behind their masters. In the mean time the unhorsed knights had risen from the ground, and Anjou, though sorely hurt, was able to mount; but seeing his men all down, and William turning to charge him once more, he fled at full speed.

"Turn, traitor! coward!" shouted William; "thou shalt not escape me; turn and die at once."

But the miscreant fled with greater speed.

"There is no time to lose, driver," said William, turning to the postilion; "great guerdon shall be yours. The daughter of Earl Baldwin is in the litter; her father is great and generous. I am William, duke of Normandy! On, then! and if we are pursued, fly towards Ghent with the princess, whilst I give battle to the assailants. We shall soon meet numbers coming to our aid. As to you,

Digitized by Google

Sir Baudric, your conduct does you no credit; your choice is now to enter my service and earn your ransom to Taillefer, whose prisoner you are; or if you like not my service, Taillefer shall pass his lance through your body at once. There is no time to lose in trifling—choose!"

"Nor do I need time, most noble duke. Such a choice would never embarrass Olifant Baudric. By the mass, had yon galliard stood by me, I would have fought on; but he left me to be killed like a dog at this good knight's pleasure! Therefore, Duke William, I am your man: if we are pursued, you shall find me bold and true, for my will was never in the work I have had to do. Marley and I had resolved to free this lady if we could, and then to abandon the service of Anjou; but it needed an arm like yours to undertake the matter as it has been now achieved."

The Lady Matilda heard all that had passed; and when William opened the litter to tell her she was rescued, her first words were:

"On, on! for God's sake, on! We shall be quickly pursued. Brave Duke William, you will be overpowered by numbers; for God's sake, forward! Stop not to speak; but on, on!—merciful God! go on."

They soon cleared the bad part of the road, the country was then more open, and enabled them to press forward with great speed; but ere long they perceived a body of men cross the hill far behind.

"It is Anjou, by the mass! I know his troop," exclaimed Baudric. "And now, duke, I can speak boldly to you: before I dreaded to be accused of cowardice, after the vile scenes I had been an actor in, but now comes the trial; and I swear to you, by the honour of a knight, that while life is in me I will fight by your side. My man-at-arms will do the same." The other had been killed by William.

They continued to press the horses of the litter forward; but the enemy evidently gained upon them, and were apparently a numerous body. The anxiety of William became great.

"Boy," said he to the driver, "if we be overtaken, let the lady out at the first wood you reach out of sight of the pursuers, or the first house, and then continue your flight;

Digitized by Google

and, dearest lady, there hide yourself; the driver will continue to fly with the litter, which will attract the pursuers, thinking that you are still in it, and the reward which awaits the postilion will induce him, if not overtaken, to carry the news to your father ere night falls, who will come with strong aid to your rescue. But I trust things will not go so hard with us; we are four, and if this Sir Baudric be a true knight, by the holy rood those gallants and their steeds shall sweat ere they unhorse us; we are all stout men, and I feel a match for half their numbers." Scarcely had these words passed Duke William's lips, when they turned the road, and met a strong party of knights, sent out to scour the country in search of the Lady Matilda.

"Halt! or we ride you down, knights!" cried the leader. "The daughter of the earl of Flanders has been carried off by robbers, and we search for her—say whom have ye in this covered litter?"

"Oh, I am safe, I am safe!" cried, or rather screamed Matilda from within the vehicle; "here I am safe—thanks to the duke of Normandy!"

"Couch your lances, brave knights! the miscreant count of Anjou is the robber, and will be upon us in a few minutes; let half your party attend the carriage, the other half follow me, and we will meet those knaves so rudely that few shall hold their saddles, though twice our numbers,—upon them!"

"Flanders to the rescue, ho!" shouted the Flemish knights, as they struck spurs into their horses, and followed the Norman chief, who had wheeled round his steed and advanced towards the pursuers; but the enemy, seeing this reinforcement, retreated.

The rescued Matilda and her knights proceeded on the road to Ghent; the scouts and look-out men on the tower soon told the news to Earl Baldwin, who, rushing forth, met his daughter a bowshot from the gate. Boniface, nearly as agitated as his lord, followed, but his mule could not keep up.

"Curse the beast!" cried Boniface, losing all patience. "God forgive me! Is the Lady Matilda safe and undishonoured? Thick-hided brute! devil! won't ye trot? O for a Carmelite's cord to bang you with!" and again the holy father swore irreverently, as the rushing crowd from

Digitized by Google

the town passed him—all hurrying to know the Lady Matilda's fate.

The earl, on reaching the litter, leaped from his horse, calling out,—"Matilda, my child! my child! are you once more given to me?" Then raising her in his arms, he held her long to his breast, while tears rolled down his cheeks.

Boniface now came up.

"Holy Virgin! Father of mercy! Are you safe, lady?" And he rolled from his mule with such agitation of joy that his legs gave way, and he fell at her feet, which he kissed repeatedly, crying out still, "Are you safe—are you safe, dear lady?"

Now came up the old nurse, Gertrude; but her strength failed, and a faint scream, as she fell, gave the first notice of her presence. In a moment Matilda had her in a strict embrace, and placed her in the litter, lying by her side. When she recovered, her first words were,—

"Oh! the rat! the rat!" and she clung to her mistress with an agony of love and fear.

The cavalcade soon arrived at Count Baldwin's castle. Meanwhile the duke of Normandy had ridden ahead with Taillefer; but the scene had made a strong impression on his aspiring, powerful young mind.

"Let me remember this," he said to Taillefer, "the traitors who sought my life, and from whom I was obliged to fly, were great men in power. All were indebted, more or less, to my illustrious father, and to mark this sense of obligation they sought to destroy his son. And that, too, before I have had years enough either to acquire experience, or do evil to any of them. If evil I have done, of which I am not conscious, at least to them I had shown nothing but grace and favour,—so much for the gratitude of nobles. Now here, the whole of the poor population pour forth from their city to welcome Matilda, who is loved for her kindness; and they seem also to have felt anxiously for their earl, who is reputed to be just and good; yet I have seen, in all this crowd, but few of the rich and noble—mind that, Taillefer. Those who are poor are sufficiently chastised by their poverty, and a sovereign's whole mind should be applied to relieve and protect them; their gratitude and support is

Digitized by Google

certain, because they must always have so many despots to torment them, that it is their nature, as men, to cling steadily to the most powerful while they are sure of his will and power to protect them.

"On the other hand, we see that nobles are generally bad; the rich have seldom any feelings of kindness, but have strong feelings of fear, and must be kept in awe with an iron-handed rule. A sovereign should treat the rich with reserve, watchfulness, and rigour; and take every opportunity of striking at their purses. Let him make them poor, and he will make them grateful. Exalt the poor and abase the rich; the nearer you can bring them to a level the more easily can they be ruled: for it is clear that the more equally a pair of scales is balanced, the less is the weight required to give the preponderance to either side.

"Put down the rich villains in Normandy with a strong hand I will—or they shall put me down! For, by the holy saints, I will not endure that the ducal crown and glaive be a mockery and a bauble, like a jester's cap and wooden sword. I have this day seen that the poor people are the real strength, and best allies of a sovereign; and from this day let the Norman nobles look to it, for either they or I shall go down!

"If the king of France will hold to his word, and to his pledged promise, my revenge shall be swift; and if Henry be a traitor to his benefactor's son—why then I will strike France also! Normandy is rich, powerful, full of resources; and I daily discover that I have abilities sufficient to employ these resources with effect. My enemies are numerous; but each of them has his enemies too; and those enemies are my friends. Thus, even from the number of my foes do I draw hopes and confidence. If a duke of Normandy despairs, who is to hope?—No, no, I shall soon be in my duchy again; and by the power that made me, they shall find the boy, as they are pleased to call me, their master and liege lord! Vengeance I have sworn to have, and this day I have learned one of the best ways to have it. Matilda, too, shall be mine; her father wishes it; the Pope alone opposes me; but the Pope shall not rule me—let the old

Digitized by Google

dotard do his worst! I know the Normans, they are not priest-ridden, and never shall be while I am their duke. There shall be but one saddle on their back, and in that saddle I alone will sit. Therefore, sir Pope, Matilda shall be mine."

Taillefer approved of all the young duke said, for, besides thinking him right, he knew William too well to contradict him. He entered into all the plans of his feudal chief, who now fell into a thoughtful mood, while his squire, being of a more jovial temper, amused himself with singing a Scandinavian song.

WAR SONG.

1.

Odin, in Asgaard's halls,
Prepares the victors' bowls;
Dread Angerbode loud calls,
Foul Fenris fiercely howls!
Then welcome war,
Whose terrors are
The Norseman's promised heaven,
Let skulls abound,
And mead flow round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

2.

The Gjaller horn shall wind,
Great Thor shall hurl his mace;
No peace shall Balder find,
And Loke destroy our race.
But welcome war,
Whose terrors are
The Norseman's promised heaven
Let skulls abound,
And mead flow round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

3.

Nidhoggur's breath shall spread
From out the Norman realm;

Digitized by Google

And Walkiries call the dead,
While heroes cleave the helm!
So welcome war,
Whose terrors are
The Norseman's promised heaven!
Let skulls abound,
And mead flow round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

4.

At Villir's dreadful blast,
His arrows fly amain;
And cowards stand aghast,
As round them fall the slain!
Yet welcome war,
Whose terrors are
The Norseman's promised heaven!
Let skulls abound,
As mead flows round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

5.

Their warlike ghosts shall spring
O'er Bafrost's aerial arch;
From Asgaard greetings ring,
To hail them on their march!
Then welcome war,
Whose terrors are
The Norseman's promised heaven!
Let skulls abound,
As mead flows round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

6.

Forth from Valhalla's towers,
Sweet strains of love arise!
And wanton in their bowers,
Sing blue-eyed Valkiries.
Then welcome war,
Whose guerdons are
The Norseman's promised heaven!
Beauties abound,
And mead flows round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

Digitized by Google

7.

Thus much has Woden told;
But who shall fall or live,
Nor spirit can unfold,
Nor sorcerer can conceive!
Still welcome war,
Whose guerdons are
The Norsman's promised heaven!
Beauties abound,
And mead flows round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

8.

Dark fate no more foretells,
Nor sanguine Tyr has shown,
To magic's deepest spell,
All else remains unknown!
Yet welcome war,
Whose guerdons are
The Norseman's promised heaven!
Beauties abound,
And mead flows round
The warriors of the Raven!
Hœrscaun Haulda Barma!

"That song pleases me," said William; "I like the warlike character of our northern forefathers, and Neel of Coutances, with his band of traitors, shall find that I will imitate the deeds of my ancestors. Like us they were men, and if we examine the arms which they have left, we see that our bodies are as large and strong as theirs were. It is courage that makes heroes, and we can do as great deeds as they did, if we have but the courage to try. I will stay but one day here, Taillefer, and then return to Paris, thence to Normandy, and let these traitors find that William is as good a warrior as Rollo; if not, let me go where Rollo is gone; for I will be master of Normandy, or in the Valhalla ere I am a year older."

The look of Duke William, as he said this, assured Taillefer that he would hold to his vow; and in this temper they reached the castle of Earl Baldwin, who arrived at the same time.

Digitized by Google

"Noble duke of Normandy," said the earl of Flanders, "how shall I ever be able to express my gratitude to the saviour of my child? But for you I should have lost her for ever!"

"Sir earl," answered William, drily, "do you speak as one who is serious, or do you speak in knightly compliment?"

"This, noble Norman, is no time for empty compliments. My heart is full of joy. I owe it all to your courage and your cool judgment, which made that courage, great as it is, subordinate to the object of saving my daughter; for this you have my friendship, my love, and my gratitude for ever."

"Then, Earl Baldwin, hear me; and let all men hear me, for I speak solemnly and earnestly—give me your daughter in marriage!"

The earl started. He knew William wished for her hand. He wished it himself. But he had just recovered her, and the effects of his agony were still pressing upon his nerves. Besides, the Pope had refused his consent. In a few moments, however, he recovered, though the stern eye of the duke was fixed upon his countenance.

"Sir duke, the Pope refuses."

"No! the Pope does not refuse; it is the interest of your enemy, the emperor of Germany, that refuses. Are you, the Lady Matilda, and I, to be sacrificed to the shuffling policy of the Vatican? Defy these tricks, most noble Baldwin! Strengthen yourself by an alliance with me. The king of France will aid me; but God aids me, which is surer help! He has given me an arm to aid myself. The strange accidents which have made me save your daughter are marked by the finger of God. Attend to him, and give the Pope to understand that what God has decreed it is not in your power to oppose, nor becoming the Holy See to contravene."

"What must I do?" said Baldwin, turning to Boniface.

"Do!" said Boniface, in an emphatic loud voice—"do! Would you have me advise you to disobey the see of Rome? Heaven forbid!" continued he, crossing himself, and bowing with an affected humility which brought his mouth close to the ear of Earl Baldwin, into which he muttered, in a low but energetic manner, through his teeth, "If you prefer your

Digitized by Google

temporal interests (and you are not a priest as I am) I think, I think—zounds, sir earl, have you a nose on your face? What the devil makes you ask a priest's advice in a matter so plain."

"What advises the holy father?" said William, sternly.

"That it is Earl Baldwin's best worldly interest to give his fair daughter to Duke William; but God forbid I should advise the earl of Flanders to do aught that should endanger his immortal soul, or expose him to the anger of our holy father the Pontiff." Then again he bowed low, close to Earl Baldwin—"In God's name, earl, what are you about? Give her; we'll manage the Pope." Then raising his voice—"It behoves not a man of my holy calling to remain where any discussion is held as to the obedience due to the see of Rome."

Saying this he ostentatiously retired, in affected displeasure but real satisfaction, at having made William understand that to his opinion the young duke owed Matilda.

"Noble duke of Normandy, Matilda is yours," said the earl.

At these words a shout of joy was put forth by the spectators. The news spread like wildfire through the town, and "Long live Duke William of Normandy and the Princess Matilda!" resounded from all quarters.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XV.

Duke William being nearly taken,
Naked rides to save his bacon,
Wishing, no doubt, when leaping ditches,
To have a pair of buckskin breeches.

Now boy Wace, we will set down how the duke of Normandy escaped from the conspirators of Bayeux, and how it happened that he fell in with the count of Anjou on that miscreant enterprise to carry off the Princess Matilda: and how also, having so escaped, and so miraculously timed his succour—certes it was very miraculous!—for the safety of the lady, he should have been clad in such rusty armour, and be so slenderly accompanied, no man being with him but the brave minstrel, Taillefer the Warlike.

All these matters savour strongly of romaunt, and are of much ornament to a veracious history, written by an aged staid knight, such as I am, good Robert Wace. The young duke was indeed greatly fraught with notions of romaunt, which led him to feats of chivalry when his political interest did not interfere, or his vengeance demand that they should be abandoned; for on those occasions he would put all romaunt aside. Neither idleness, nor imprudence, nor mercy, nor—for truth must be told—justice, were listened to by Duke William when opposed to his plans. He left naught undone in war or politics that he had power to do, and no man ever escaped his vengeance, against whom his vengeance had been vowed. He was truly a most wonderful man, and a very romantic knight; but when all was known, most of his chivalric adventures turned out to have some advantageous end, which was concealed by them at the time, and only appeared long after. He was indeed wise as a serpent, and strong as a lion; but I never knew him gentle except to the Lady Matilda; and by the Holy Virgin, I think the lady had more merit in that than the Conqueror.

Digitized by Google

The knight having crossed himself, proceeded with his narrative as before.

William's romaunt went hand in hand with his politics, and this accounts in some measure for his reappearance when the reader could hardly have expected to find him: this shall I proceed to show by returning to what passed at Bayeux among the conspirators, whom we left in consultation at the bishop's palace, arranging the plot for assassinating the young duke.

It will be recollected that the fool Galet left the room, and that the traitors had sallied forth to assemble their men-at-arms, and prepare for carrying their horrid plan into execution.

The reader will also call to mind, that our young hero left Caen fully resolved to establish his authority in the north-western parts of his duchy. In this temper he arrived at Valogne, where, for the moment, he established his small court. Ignorant he was of the conspiracy at Bayeux, which, from the situation of that town, was the more dangerous as it cut William off from Caen and Falaise, where his strength lay, placing him unguarded in the midst of his enemies.

The day the conspirators decided on their future operations William had spent at Valogne, hearing complaints and establishing a more equal dispensation of justice than had been customary in that town. Fatigued with the business, he had retired early to rest, without suspicion of any approaching danger. But at midnight he was suddenly awakened by the fool Galet, who had silently entered the house, and reached his chamber unseen.

"I come to save thy life, uncle William; there are traitors, false traitors!" cried he, in breathless agony. "Rise, uncle, rise! rise and fly, or you will be slain! Guy of Burgundy, Neel of Coutances, the bishop of Bayeux, and Grimult of Plessis, come with five hundred men-at-arms from Bayeux. Fly, uncle, fly!"

"How know you this, sir fool? I fear me you are sir knave!"

"O no, no!—fly, fly!" repeated the fool, in evident terror at not being at once credited in his tale, and repeating, in his strange, half-idiot way, all he had heard, giving

Digitized by Google

such details between his constant cries of "Fly! fly!" with which he ended every sentence of his story. At last, as if wound up to an almost frantic agony, the poor fool rather shouted than cried—

"O uncle William, lose not your life that I have run for with all my swiftness! Yet thy swiftness may not do, for they were saddling, and I heard the trumpet's sound. They come! they come!"

Then William felt that not a moment was to be lost, and he sprung from his bed.

"Life must not be lost, if activity can save it," thought he to himself; "an instant may be fatal." So saying, he seized his sword, slipped down unseen to his stable in all haste, and, naked as he was, saddled a horse, and issued forth at full speed, taking the road by the sea to avoid Bayeux, from whence the danger came. But this road for some distance was the same as that of Bayeux. On reaching the causeway across the river Vire, he heard the tramp of horses and the clang of armed men, crossing the causeway and coming towards him. Being now fully aware of his great danger, he immediately concealed himself behind a thick hedge, for the armed band were within hearing, and the duke knew their voices.

"By the holy Virgin!" said the bishop, "but we shall catch the young tanner in bed, little dreaming that his own skin is to be dressed!"

"Never mind, good priest," replied Grimult; "he won't die unconfessed. You will be there to shrive him of his sins!"

"Yes, with my dagger," replied the bishop; "for so as we send him out of this world, it's little I heed where he goes in the next."

"And thou Sir Guy," said the earl of Coutances, "thou art a thankless knight to return the accolade he gave you across the shoulder, by a stab of your dagger in his throat!"

"Pooh man!" observed the bishop, laughing; "the bastard loves usury, and so Sir Guy pays him with interest!"

The words died away as the cavalcade passed on briskly, and William had now proof of the conspiracy formed against his life, and of the men engaged in it.

Digitized by Google

Vowing vengeance against them, he pressed forward on his flight, and by daybreak reached Rye, a village on the seaside. This village he entered when it was scarcely dawn, and seeing a gentleman sitting at his door, accosted him, asking the road to Falaise.

"Holy Saint Mary!" replied the gentleman; "Seigneur, what brings you here in such guise, unattended, unarmed, and almost naked?"

"Who are you," replied William, "that know me?"

"I am Hubert of Rye, and hold this village in fief from you. Tell me truly your state, and be fearless; for as your liege vassal I will assist you with my life."

The duke hesitated; his first impulse was to slay the man; but better and wiser thoughts determined him to trust Hubert, and he told his faithful vassal what had happened.

Hubert made him dismount, enter his house, and take refreshment; then preparing a fresh horse, and calling his three sons, he said to them—

"Squires, behold your liege lord, Duke William! Mount your horses, and as you owe fealty to him and to me, conduct him safely to Falaise. Take heed not to enter either city, town, or village, nor go upon the high road."

The young men quickly saddled their horses, and off at full speed they went with William, crossed the Orne at Fonpendant, and arrived in safety at Falaise, where the duke was received with great joy. Meanwhile the faithful Hubert awaited the arrival of the traitors in pursuit, and having offered to conduct the chase, led them far in a contrary direction, where finally they gave over their search.

Duke William, having thus reached his native town, directed the fortifications to be strengthened and provisioned for a siege; made John Bellair de Blainville governor, with a strong garrison, and proceeded to Rouen, which he placed in a state capable of resisting any attacks of the conspirators, who were now in open rebellion, and threatening Caen. But that town had been, by the young hero's forecast, rendered too strong to be taken, and they feared to attack the faithful Fitz Osborne.

Digitized by Google

From Rouen, William, following the counsel of his uncle Mauger, archbishop of Rouen, proceeded at once to the court of Henry, king of France, his guardian and king-lord, bound by all the feudal laws to protect his vassal.

On arriving at Paris, William was well attended; it was dark, but he went straight to the palace of King Henry, and demanded an audience.

Astonished at the sudden arrival of the duke of Normandy, and at such a demand from a vassal so powerful, the sovereign immediately summoned his nobles, and then received the duke by torch-light, amidst all his courtiers, who were accoutred in full armour, for they were fearful of treason.

The nobles stood on either hand, with their visors raised, forming an iron vista of helmed warriors, whose various looks, stature, and attitudes, were striking and imposing; some resting on their lances, some with arms folded, others holding their shields, which rested on the ground. Prelates and priests, and household officers were intermixed; here a tall knight stood erect, leaning with both hands on the hilt of his two-handed sword; there stood others armed with shorter weapons; but the iron avenue was perfect, for none on either side passed the line, and the vista widened as it receded from the throne. The torches cast a deep red flare of light, glancing from mail to mail, and the curling smoke, ascending to the high vaulted roof, gave a thick atmosphere and dusky hue to the scene.

All eyes were fixed upon the young and stately Norman, as he entered with his dauntless and commanding air, under which even the king quailed, and every spectator asked himself,—

"Is this proud young chief come to do, or to receive homage?"

King Henry was seated in the perspective of the warlike vista, on the throne of Dagobert, his sword and lance-bearers standing on either hand. He was in chain armour; his helmet on his head, surmounted with a crown of gold; his heater shield hung round his neck, and his right hand grasped the hilt of a dagger which was in his girdle, his left holding the sceptre, rested upon his knee; his heels were

Digitized by Google

drawn rather under him, and together; so that when the duke entered, the king could rise—either slowly and gracefully to receive him in courtly guise, or, if evil was intended, he could spring up and defend his life: for he greatly feared Duke William, and also many of his own barons, because, in those days, assassinations were often sudden and unexpected.

William was armed, his lance, sword, helmet, shield, and spurs, were borne by esquires behind him, and he advanced slowly, holding his tall and brawny form very erect; but when within a few feet of the throne, he went down upon his knees, stooped low, and slightly touched the king's foot with his hand; then raising his body so as to remain on one knee, and leaning rather back, he stretched forth his hands towards the sovereign, saying,—

"O king-lord! I your humble and faithful vassal, with my hands held between yours I swore fealty and true service for my dukedom; to this oath have I been true as the holy Gospels on which I swore. Then, O king! when installed on the ducal throne of Normandy, I again swore, upon the Evangelists, and before God (with my hands placed between those of the archbishop of Rouen), to observe inviolate three things—

"First, to preserve the Holy Mother Church and my people in sincere peace and harmony, one with the other.

"Next, to defend all good men against evildoers.

"Lastly, to enjoin all my officers to temper justice with mercy.

"The archbishop, convinced of my sincerity and truth, placed upon my finger this ducal ring; and then, praying to the Father of Heaven to guide me in the right path, he girded on that ducal sword." Here William gracefully threw back his arm, pointing to the sword borne by his esquire.

"Good and liege sovereign," he continued, "I have truly kept this second oath to my people, as sacredly as I have held firm and unbroken that which, as your faithful vassal, I pledged to your royal self."

"Even so, O king of France!" exclaimed Mauger, archbishop of Rouen, who stood erect behind his nephew in full

Digitized by Google

pontificals. "Even so has he done, even as he did swear to do before the Lord of Hosts."

As the proud archbishop uttered these words in a strong and solemn voice, he crossed himself, and bowed his mitred head in reverence to the name of the Most High.

"And now," continued William, still upon his bended knee, "thus true to God and your highness, I come here to claim your *protection* and aid against disloyal vassals—bound to me, O king, even as I am to thee! These traitors are linked in conspiracy to deprive me of my ducal throne and life together! Their names are Guy of Burgundy, Neel of Coutances, Regnault count of Bessin, Grimult de Plessis, Raoul de Briquesart, Hamon le Dentu, Hugh bishop of Bayeux, and others. These men seek to take my dukedom and my life. But it is not only by just claim and right of vassalage that I claim the protection and aid of my king-lord. I have another claim, if my liege will hear me."

"Speak!" said Henry.

"I am here a suppliant for my rights, even as thou, great king, fled to my father's court for succour against traitors! My father, as a true and faithful vassal bound to his liege lord, put the Norman chivalry in motion, and, in union with many brave French knights now present, restored King Henry to his lawful throne. To King Henry then, the fugitive and suppliant son of Duke Robert now appeals for that support which the father so readily gave; and ye, brave and steel-clad sirs around, to ye I appeal; and as ye defended the crown of France defend also the vassal of the crown. On this policy depends the glory of France and its strength; your own safety and your honour are at stake. O king! save the son of your friend, and the faithful vassal of your crown." Here William again bowed his body; and Henry cried aloud,—

"By St. Martin, sir duke, but you have well spoken! You have pleaded your cause with your father's courage and wisdom; and here I swear, and I call on all present to swear, that our vassal, William duke of Normandy, shall be restored to his rights! Barons and baronets," added he, and seized and drew his sword, "swear!"

"We swear!" was repeated by all present, catching the

Digitized by Google

enthusiasm of the king: they drew their falchions, and struck their shields.

"Arise, sir duke!" said the king, "and let me prove to you that I am a just feudal chief and king-lord, and also a true and faithful guardian to the son of my friend Robert the Magnificent. Barons, baronets, knights, and esquires, I summon you all to meet me in arms this day month, at Saint-Clair-sur-Epte; and so let us break up this meeting. To-morrow, duke of Normandy, we will assemble our council to meet yourself and your noble uncle, monseigneur of Rouen, whose holy prayers, and *pure morals*, will bless our enterprise." Here a sarcastic smile overspread the countenance of Duke William, and even the hard and sinister features of the prelate himself were with great difficulty composed to gravity; but the hypocritical struggle was concealed by a low obeisance to the king.

On the morrow the council met, and the future operations were arranged for the campaign, which ended in the celebrated battle of the Val des Dunes—William's first field as the general of an army.

"Taillefer," said the duke of Normandy to his esquire as they quitted the council-chamber, "by the mass but I have work for you, if your stomach leans as much towards feats of adventure and lady's love as mine does."

"Noble duke, say unto Taillefer 'do that,' and by this good sword which I may say I am not deficient in the use of, that Taillefer will do, or die."

"I know that thou art an expert varlet in the art of fence, good esquire, and well skilled in songs, most excellent minstrel; and therefore have I chosen thee to be my boon companion on an adventure. Know then, that I have despatched orders to Fitz Osborne, the seneschal of Normandy, to raise the Norman chivalry with all due speed; meanwhile I will even visit the earl of Flanders for three objects becoming a duke, a true knight, and a lover.

"My first object is to form an alliance with Earl Baldwin, and raise some sheaves of spears to aid me in the coming fight with these traitors. My second object is to see and try the truth of Matilda before I propose marriage with her a second time; to do so is now at my option, for, God be

Digitized by Google

praised, I care neither for the Pontiff nor his priests, beyond what is just and fitting. Rome and Rouen are far asunder, and if the Pontiff sets his gouty toe within the precincts of my dukedom, I'll tread upon it with such a stamp that the Vatican shall ring with his yells! Now I know well, brave Taillefer, that thou art too good a minstrel to be over strict in these particulars; and I know also that there is one Boniface about the good earl of Flanders, who is a man of great learning and extraordinary piety—when he thinks of it; but his mind being unusually employed in politics, he seldom allows the great stream of his good thoughts to be troubled by small rivulets of papal niceties from Italy, he turns their course away, leaving them room enough in other directions, and troubles not himself to seek where their waters flow. This same Boniface and I are pretty much of one opinion,—that the union of Flanders and Normandy will hold our friends in Paris true to us; for they only are true who find it dangerous to be false! We therefore think that the Pontiff's prohibition to my marriage with the Lady Matilda is a matter of small account, and easily defied; but ere I ask this beautiful and accomplished damsel, I wish to see her again, unknown to any one. Since we first loved some time has passed: we were then both children; a few years have made a vast change in my stature and my thoughts. You are totally unknown at the court of Flanders; my object then, is (having some days that I can now command) to go there disguised as a poor and needy knight, with you for my esquire in like poor array, and so prove any adventures that may befall us either on the road or at the court of Flanders. What say you, squire—are your nerves in tune for such a dance?"

"Most excellent duke, thou hast said and done maint and maint kind things to me; but all the things that thou ever saidst or didst are not like this. Never was squire so joyful as Oliver Taillefer!"

"Well then good Oliver, prepare our strongest horses, let our armour be uncleaned, and we will depart before dawn to-morrow."

The incidents which befell these two young cavaliers on the road were too trifling for a sage knight like myself

Digitized by Google

to recount, good Robert Wace; but as you are a curious and well-informed youth, I will, at more fitting time, tell you these and other trifles, too light for so cunning a history as I am now imparting to thy youthful mind. When you grow old, good youth, no doubt you will think over, and it may be you will record, many things which I now tell thee. But let us continue the narrative, for I am not over sage to lose time in idle converse. There is much for me to dictate, and at my age, our days being numbered, the last day must be at hand. Thus it happened that William became the knight of the rusty armour.

We know that the gallant young duke continued his journey till he met the party about to carry off the Lady Matilda; we have also told what happened thereupon.

The marriage with Matilda was arranged, to the great delight of the lovers, but with due caution, as the pious earl of Flanders was advised by his acute almoner to delay the ceremony till an attempt to gain the Pope's consent should be made, with an understanding to his Holiness, that his refusal would in no wise avail, and might exhibit rather weakness than conduce to good policy.

But Boniface had also a second reason for his delays; it was to see whether William succeeded in his struggle for his dukedom; for the shrewd priest saw neither policy nor propriety in sending his fair pupil into the midst of fierce civil war. William, therefore, took an affectionate leave of his affianced bride, and departed for his capital.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVI.

Now William deals his hardest knocks,
Routing rebellious fighting cocks.

In the days which elapsed between the council held at Paris by the king of France, after the duke of Normandy had made the appeal to him as his liege lord, and William's arrival at Rouen, the news of the war had spread, and the young and ardent burned for the fight; the middle-aged looked for plunder, but the old went to battle with extreme reluctance, and because they feared that both sides might otherwise hold them for foes: thus they might encounter double risk, for in such small wars it is perilous to be neuter.

The French king quickly assembled an army at Saint-Clair-sur-Epte. His warriors were drawn from Orleans, Estampes, Melun, Bourges, Compiègne, which alone obeyed his immediate orders; the rest were those who followed his great barons, and were rather in alliance with him than serving as his subjects. The levy of shields for Duke William came from the Rouennois, the Vexin, Lieuvain, the Pays de Caux and D'Auge, of Evreux, of Caen, and of Avranches.

The assembly of these men was a great scourge to the people, for on their roving irregular march many quarrelled with and pillaged the peasants, spreading in bands through the land, and marching upon the point of union at their leisure. The gathering of this army was disorderly in every sense of the word: the lawless barons led up their forces, each as he would, and they poured in upon Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, rolling and irregular as clouds thickening before a storm. The king's seneschal and marshals endeavoured to create order and put the obstreperous host into some shape of battle; but the haughty barons would take no rule, and their complaints were loud and insolent against those who sought to

Digitized by Google

create order. At last the king and Duke William arrived, and then did these bands fall into comparative obedience as they marched towards the enemy, who awaited them encamped at the Val des Dunes.

The king of France and the duke of Normandy, commanding their respective forces, had nearly twenty thousand warriors, and were resolved to reduce the rebellious vassals to obedience.

On the side of the enemy, whose numbers rather exceeded the united royal and ducal army, the commanders were Neel of Coutances, one of the best warriors of the day; Reginald count of Bessin, Grimult de Plessis, Raoul de Briquesart, and Hamond de Thorigny, with the warlike bishop of Bayeux, and the rest of the conspirators. Their object was to extend their own power, by setting up Guy of Burgundy; because, by giving the ducal coronet to this youth they might deduct as many jewels from it as they found suitable to their own interests. If they were defeated they were lost; being assured that the French king and the duke would not spare them; and even if this should happen, they were certain to be reduced to such a state of weakness as would render them harmless for the future. The sea was behind them, and as a body they had no retreat. But William and the king of France would only lose the battle; for if defeated, reinforcements would pour down from Rouen and Paris, and enable them to dispute every inch of ground from the Val des Dunes to the Seine; and if beaten across that river, they could still defend the passage with hourly increasing numbers; whereas the victorious rebels could only advance through a hostile land, every march removing them farther from their resources, and accumulating enemies in their rear.

Such were the objects, strength, prospects, and commanders of these two armies; and the battle was of so decisive a nature as to be worthy of the talents and fortunes which distinguished the future conqueror of England, then only in his nineteenth year, but nevertheless the prime mover and master mind which ruled the campaign.

The positions of the royal and ducal forces were thus described by a poet of that day, who, had he lived long enough

Digitized by Google

and continued to improve in quantity and quality of rhyme, might very possibly have rivalled Homer:—

> "Entre Argences et Mezidon,
> Sur la rivière de l'Aizon,
> Se herbergerent ceux de France,
> Et joux tant les eaux de Méance,
> Qui par Argances va courant,
> Se herbergèrent li Nordmans,
> Qui à Guillaume se tenoient,
> Et en sa bezogne venoient."

The plains of the Val des Dunes are extensive; the ground gently undulating, but fit for charges of knights in full armour, there being neither rocks nor broken ground to impede the career of the gens d'armes. In short, it was a plain well suited for two hosts to meet in mortal combat, and the poet thus excellently well described it:—

> "Vale Dunes est en aismeiz,
> Entre Argences è Cingueleiz,
> De Caen i peut l'en cunter,
> Treis leugs et mien kuider,
> Li plaines sunt lunges è lées.
> Ni a granz monz ni granz vallées,
> Asez prouf du vé Bérangier,
> Ni a boscage ne rochier,
> Maiz encuntre soleil levant,
> Se funt la terre en avalant;
> Une rivière li avirone,
> Deverz midi, e deverz none."

On these grounds the opposing forces were placed. The day dawned fine. The king of France and the young duke of Normandy, both in magnificent armour, entered the church of St. Roeson de Valmery, where they heard mass. It was an awful sight to see the house of God filled by warriors in full mail; a sovereign and a sovereign duke, kneeling before the Most High, and praying for victory over the rebels. The clang of iron arms seemed to chime in chorus with the hymns of holy men, as warriors knelt in their full panoply upon the stone pavement; lances and swords, and ponderous maces there lying quiet and harmless, but ere one short hour should pass, to drip with Christian gore, as they flashed and whirled in the coming fight! And hearts

Digitized by Google

were there, beating with life's full tide, which, in a few moments, would be dead and cold as the steel which now encased them—vainly encased them, for their hour was come! A brief space of time was to place them before him to whom they were then bowing, elate with hope! In one short hour, the trial of arms on earth was to forerun the quick following summons to heaven, and precede the stern question—"Why comest thou to me smeared with the blood of thy brother?" But none then thought of this—it was the moment of battle! The spirit of Christianity was gone; manhood was roused to danger and to death; to slay or to be slain. No man asked, "Why is this?" Kneeling, they craved God's mercy, and they rose, not to spare, but to destroy! From their God to their arms the transition was instant, and issuing from the church the cry was—"To horse, to horse!"

Then was seen all the stir of preparation—some mounting, others taking a last examination of the buckles and straps of their armour; here young knights threw their lances high in air, exultingly; there more cautious champions tightened their saddle-girths; men shook hands in case they met no more, and the shrill neighing of excited steeds pealed through the glorious field! The order went forth for the combat; the standard of battle was unfurled, and in a few minutes all stood arrayed in a single line of battle, their highly wrought armour glistening in the sun, which dashed its level beams upon the lustrous steel.

An awful silence reigned through the host, and then the king and duke of Normandy drank a cup of wine, as they sat armed in their saddles.

"Victory to us!" cried King Henry.

"And vengeance!" shouted the duke. That long line of grim warriors heard his deep strong voice and smiled; the hearts of the soldiers caught the flame, and were filled with his own fierce spirit—fearless and ruthless.

"Who have we here?" said Henry, pointing to one hundred and forty garnished lances, the point of each bearing some fair lady's gage of love: they were halted in a near but doubtful position, so that they could join either side. William looked eagerly at this shining squadron.

Digitized by Google

"Those cavaliers will show play," said he, "and give hot work, whichever side they oppose; the silken banner is that of Raoul de Tesson, and I am not aware that he has any cause of complaint against me."

The commander of the splendid troop at this moment turned to his followers,—"Knights," said he, "Neel and Reginald have asked me to take their part, and I promised so to do, and swore that the first man I would strike on this day should be Duke William; yet to William have I sworn faith and homage—what shall I do?"

"Sir Raoul," answered his knights with heat, "you are bound to Duke William—God forbid that you should fight against your seigneur and break your oath; but go to the duke, strike him gently with thy gauntlet, and so redeem thy pledge to Neel and Reginald."

On hearing these words, Raoul exclaimed, "Let honour be our guide!" and shouting the war-cry of the Tessons of Harcourt—"Tur aie!" (Thor aid us!) put spurs to his horse, galloped up to William, and pulling off his gauntlet, struck the duke on the shoulder.

"Thus," said he, "I acquit myself of my promise to Neel, —be not angry, noble duke, I will serve you this day loyally as my seigneur!"

"Raoul! Grand mercy!" answered the duke; "think of what you promise, and do battle bravely." Then the knight returned to the head of his brilliant squadron.

The two armies were drawn up in single lines, and each divided into four divisions. They advanced with the clangour of trumpets, and the archers shot, but had scarce time to cast a second flight of arrows when a general ardour, worthy of the Norman and French courage, suddenly stimulated both armies, and the brilliant lines of steel rushed forward to the charge.

"Dex aie!" shouted William, as he couched his lance, and pressed the rowels of his spurs into his charger's sides; his fine tall figure leaned forward for the shock, his noble war-horse dashed to the encounter, and the meeting was fearful; the clash was as if a thousand Vulcans belaboured bars of iron, horse and man rolled over, and for a while all was dust and noise.

Digitized by Google

"Dex aie, et notre Dame!" shouted the thousands of Normans under William, opposed to Regnault and his knights of Bessin, whose battle-cry was, "St. Sever, St. Sever!" and the French, "Mont-joie!" was answered with a loud and gallant, "St. Sauveur au Vicomte!" from the unflinching chivalry of the Cotentin.

In the midst of this tumult, Duke William rode cool, resolute, and gigantic; throwing over with ease all who attacked him, but seeking Regnault; his eagle eye piercing the uproar and scanning all the changes of the well-fought fray. At last, in an open space which the roll and struggle of the fight had accidentally cleared, he caught sight of Regnault.

"Turn traitor, turn!" cried William, in a voice of thunder: "turn, traitor Regnault; for by the splendour of God, flying or fighting thou diest."

Saying these words he charged full at the lord of Bessin.

A brave squire of the count Regnault, Bardon of Bayeux, threw himself before his lord, and met William in full career; but he fell pierced through the throat, and the spear passed out far behind. William left his lance in the transfixed squire, and drawing forth his sword hewed down all who gathered about the lord of Bessin to protect him from the fury of the enraged duke. But Regnault seeing his knights and esquire fall fast under the sweep of William's terrible falchion, turned his horse and fled.

On the left the brave Hamond de Thorigny encountered and overthrew Henry king of France, who, however, rose valiantly and rushed again into the fight. Thorigny fell by the hand of one of the king's esquires, but being a Cotentinois his fame was long recorded in the following distich—

"De Costentin cessi li lance
Ki abati li rèe de France."

The cowardice of Regnault was the signal for a general flight. Neel strove bravely to stop the fugitives, but the effort was vain, and a terrible carnage began.

"Strike home! spare not!" cried William with a voice and look of high command, as he pursued the fugitives; and horse and man rolled down before the powerful chieftain,

Digitized by Google

who was fierce as flaming fire, and as unrelenting. But his talent as a general was not less conspicuous than his arm was terrible in fight. He threw his army between his enemies and their line of retreat, and they were flying through a country hostile to them.

They had unwisely chosen a position with their left advanced towards the sea, and their right resting upon their communication with Argentan, of which their line of battle was a prolongation, instead of crossing and covering it. Duke William saw their mistake, and taking a position parallel to theirs, had their line of communication with Argentan in contact with his left, as it was with their right. He thus completely covered his own numerous lines of retreat. This conduct of William was grounded upon true principles of war, and the result responded to the ability of the general.

The fugitives naturally fled in the direction of Bessin and Cotentin, but were stopped by the river Orne at the village of Almagne, about three miles from Caen; the current was deep and strong, but the terrible Duke William was hard upon them, his lance in rest, and "Dex aie! Dex aie!" rung fearfully in their ears, as the Norman lances charged the flying crowds. The shouts, the sounding blows, the screams of agony and heavy fall of armed men just sped, so appalled the hesitating crowds on the bank, that all girt in steel they plunged into the silvery Orne. Tinged with blood, charged with dead bodies, and disturbed by the struggling of drowning men, the ruthless river swept them away, and then did horrid shrieks come up the stream from the unrelenting mills of Bourbillon, which, taking part with their victorious lord, broke upon their wheels the sinking rebels; but those wheels soon stopped, choked with their full feast, and shouts of victory and cries for mercy, and prayers and curses filled the air and the waters, and dead and dying men floated together down the current which glided through the erst tranquil valley of the Orne—terrible couriers to tell embattled Caen the triumph of her duke! Thus ended the battle of the Val des Dunes.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVII.

'Tis good that doubtful maidens pray,
For then they seldom go astray,
But if you want to shun a ditch,
And haven't learning, seek a witch!

We left Harold, boy Wace, discovering himself after the fight with the robbers, to Alfnoth, and claiming the hand of Editha. Silent was the Childe of Sussex, long and sternly silent, and his countenance was sad and troubled. At last, raising his head from the litter, he thus spoke :—

"The Childe of Sussex owes you much, great earl; but he gives not his daughter to a rebel, even though that rebel be Harold."

"So let it be," replied the Saxon hero, with an assumed tone. "So let it be! Of the king's pardon I despair not. My brother-in-law is just and good. Stigand and myself will prove to him how unjustly he has been taught to mistrust my father and myself; that our only fault has been the love we bear to the Saxon people. For that false Eustache of Boulogne, who hates the Saxons, hates Earl Godwin and his son, has poured poison into the king's mind; and let me tell you, noble and excellent Childe of Sussex, that you also have been deceived by the machinations of men who seek to court the earl of Boulogne, because they purpose to get money from the king through his favour. This good knight will excuse me. I speak in no rude guise against his country, but I defend my public conduct before a few friends—and I count him as one of them. The king is a good but a weak man; he has lived much among the Normans, he likes them, and it is natural that he should admire a brave and polished people. But as Edward is king of England, and not of Normandy, it is his duty to employ his Saxon subjects, and not place strangers in his favour, and in

Digitized by Google

high commands. Let us imitate in England all that merits imitation among the Normans; but let us resist being ruled by Normans: in fine, let us have Normans for our friends, not for our masters. Thus, most excellent thane, have I spoken to you as a Saxon loves to be spoken to—frankly; and when you hear Harold speak thus to one whose power and rank, however great, are not upon a par with his own, you may judge how highly he holds the Childe of Sussex in honour and in respect, and how strong the love he bears the Lady Editha: in truth, the last is proved by his danger in being now in her presence—danger great and imminent; yet he has risked it for a passing glance!"

Saying this, and bending on one knee at Editha's feet, he continued, "Dear Editha, forgive the subterfuge which I have been guilty of in calling myself Alfric."

"Most noble sir," she replied, colouring deeply, and drawing her veil close to hide her emotion,—"noble sir," she repeated—but again stopped; then, totally overpowered, she cried out, "Great earl, my feelings are too strong. Father, my dear father, speak for me!" and she fell on her knees at his side, hiding her face in his bosom. Overcome by tenderness, her father threw his arms around her; her veil and head-dress came off, and her tresses, falling like a golden shower, seemed to hide her from the world.

"Yes, Editha, my daughter, my beloved! I will speak for you. Look up, my child; and if the noble Harold knows my temper, he will know that when I gave him my hand my heart was with it. We acknowledge his patriotism, I avow my errors, and Alfnoth, the Childe of Sussex, is his firm friend for ever! But though my heart gives you to the son of the proud Earl Godwin"—here a flush passed over the face of the speaker—"it must be with the leave of our liege lord the king. My honour is at stake; that forfeited, neither your love nor my friendship would be worthy of his acceptance."

Editha looked up: her large blue eyes were filled with tears, drawn forth by powerful emotion, which at the same time suffused her cheeks with blushes; the brilliance of her snowy teeth was displayed by the indescribable smile of her lovely mouth; and all these beauties flashed through a wil-

Digitized by Google

derness of shining hair, waving, and long enough to conceal her whole figure. Enchanting was the sight of those hues, so vivid and so blended! Her fairness, her pearly teeth, the intermingled shades of roses and vermilion, the deep blueness of her eyes, the auriferous lustre of her luxuriant tresses, presented a wondrous picture of chastened loveliness. Not Harold only, but all who beheld were fascinated by her enchanting beauty.

Soon reassuming her customary calmness, and repressing all emotion, Editha, in a gentle yet solemn manner, addressed the insurgent chief,—

"Earl Harold, my father's will is mine. These are not times, nor am I a woman to trifle or play off capricious fooleries of pretended modesty. My father gives me to you, and all that I said when believing you to be Alfric, I repeat to the great and far-famed Harold. It is my father's will that you should obtain the pardon of the king. That the king should be reconciled to his noblest and best subject is my prayer, as a faithful subject and an obedient daughter. To say more to him who possesses my affection is needless. Go, then; remember that the happiness of England and of Editha the Saxon depends upon your success. But now let us depart, for my father seems weak; agitation and wounds have overpowered his great strength."

Saying these words, she mounted her palfrey, and we proceeded to the castle.

Harold soon took his leave, and as he kissed the fair small hand of Editha, her tears fell fast. He could not tear himself away; their emotion was insupportable. Her father's litter proceeded, and her attendants were at a distance; the lovers were out of hearing.

"Editha, beloved Editha, when shall we meet again? Good God! what is the use of power? In a hut I might be happy as a low-born ceorl; as Harold, the great and powerful Harold, I am wretched!"

"Harold, my Harold, do you think that I am not suffering? But to give way is vain; let us look at the lustrous side of that evanescent cloud called life. I loved Alfric as the friend of the glorious Harold, and suddenly I find Alfric and Harold are the same! Judge, then of her happiness

Digitized by Google

who in her lover finds the saviour of her nation—the second Alfred of England! O Harold! I ought to be too proud of you to tremble; you are too good, too great, too noble to sink. Yet I do tremble; I fear the dangers which encompass all I love. I wish to heaven I might go with you! My father's will alone prevents me. I care not for that of the king; I think only of him who is king to me, and who ought and will be king to all!"

"But," said Harold, "I fear for your health, your safety, Editha. Wild times come on apace; all who love me are in danger, and she who loves me above all, is above all in peril; her danger is the only danger Harold has to fear."

"Go," answered Editha; "go! Do that which your own glory and the good of England demands, and in so doing you protect your faithful, loving Editha, who ever puts up prayers to the God of heaven and earth for your safety—and when dying, she will utter your beloved name with her last breath. Harold, my Harold! I can bear no more. Go! this agony is insupportable."

"Yes, I will go, Editha; but you will often see me in this neighbourhood. My work is here; in a few days we shall meet again. Adieu, beloved!"

Editha followed her father's litter, tears rolling down her cheeks in large drops. Once she turned to look back, and saw the magnificent figure of the Saxon hero as he stood like a statue, his eyes fixed upon her adored form.

"When, oh when shall I see him again!" murmured Editha, as she withdrew her glance, and pursued her course. "I must not again turn," thought she, with an aching heart, "or the attendants will observe it. How dreadful is this feeling! I may see him still once more by a turn of my head; yet I turn not, dare not, must not, ought not to turn; and will not. But, is he not devoted to me? do I not adore him? are we not pledged to each other before the omnipresent God, to love and be true for ever? Does not my father sanction our affection? Is not Harold worthy of all the love that woman can bestow on man? Is he not the defender of the poor, and of his country? Is not his present disgrace caused by his love for the Saxons, and his detestation of overbearing foreigners, who seek place and rule in a

Digitized by Google

land where Saxons only ought to hold power? What is it to the unrivalled Harold himself, what posts are filled by the insulting Normans? His own power, his own glory, his own interest in all ways, are beyond the power of strangers, or even of the king! It is not himself that is concerned; he is in disgrace, in banishment, because he thinks not of himself, but of his countrymen, his own Saxons. Noble, glorious, adored Harold! England and Editha love you—everything that is Saxon loves you, all that is Norman hates you. But they—ay! even the hostile Normans admire and honour you! for the Normans are a brave and noble people, devoted in love, courteous in the hall, and gallant in battle.

"Dear and most beloved Harold! defender of England and of the poor, stern and terrible to the unjust, Editha is all your own: she almost scorns the proprieties of social life, which compel a woman to conceal the fulness of her love when her heart yearns to proclaim it to the world. To follow you, to be all to you that a wife can be; to console you in sadness; to be at your side in danger; to be ever ready as your companion and helpmate; these are my longings! Yet, if I throw off this social restraint and abandon all for Harold—disobedient to my father, reckless of the world's censure, forgetful of myself, thoughtful of him alone, would he so love me? Would he see his Editha with the same eyes? Will she then create the same affection as when shrouded in the worthy form which Saxon customs cast around maidens? Oh, no! the delicacy which custom demands must be adhered to by women of high mind.

"Lo! if that hateful passion, jealousy, which takes hold of the noblest minds, should be rejected by some detestable wretch, perhaps in vengeance for my unshaken love, would not Harold more readily believe his serpent-hissings? Oh, yes! his love would wither! Wherefore never will Editha quit the customs of her country. The ethel-born and the ceorl-born are alike before God, and before the customs of their country. When I am the wife of Harold he shall be as proud of me as I am of him; until then, let me trust in God and suffer in silence."

These thoughts filled Editha with a romantic courage

Digitized by Google

which her sad destiny required; for the darkness of that destiny cast over her youth a gloom and prophetic fear for which she could not account.

As her reflections were concluded, the cavalcade reached the castle.

When Editha disappeared, Harold dashed into the woods. Stirring events awaited him, but at that moment he had only feeling for Editha.

"Perhaps," thought he, as he made his way towards the sea-coast, "Alfnoth is right; Edward is deceived about me by that accursed traitor Eustache; but a deceived king is still a king—a sovereign; else by the skulls in the Valhalla, I would send these Norman intruders in such numbers there to drink the beer of Asgaard as would drain Odin's cellars! Editha so loves me that she could be persuaded to marry and follow me. But where? Dangers of all kinds would environ her! and what would she be? undutiful to her father, and therefore miserable or hardened. Now if this good battle-axe fails me not, I will place her as she deserves to be—as my wife, and second only in rank to the queen.

"Yes! I will seek pardon of the king, for Editha must be my wife, or life, and power, and glory are nought to Harold. Pardon! shall Harold ask pardon for loving England? No, it must not be; but I will have pardon, I will force it or cease to be. As an outlaw I will not live. Thousands of ceorls, with true Saxon hearts and good battle-axes, are at my bidding; and for those men's sakes am I in jeopardy. I will not set them against the king; but he must be just—forced to be so."

With these thoughts I shall now leave him for a time, and observe, good Robert Wace, that I have been particular, Robert Wace, in stating all the feelings of these two important characters, because they are essential to my excellent history, which verily I hope will descend to later times, and greatly enlighten posterity. Moreover they are curious, from the mode in which I acquired knowledge of them; for Editha, in consequence of her father's admiration of the learning he found among foreigners, had her taught by a wise clerk of Waltham Abbey, who had instructed her to write with great facility; and also in the learning of the

Digitized by Google

clergy, and with the Latin language, she was greatly acquainted. Thus having much lore, and being very cunning with her pen, she committed all Harold's deeds to parchment; and after the battle of Hastings they came into my hands, at her death, with various other things belonging to herself and Harold; all which gave me great insight of their feelings and characters during the short and melancholy career allotted to them by fate.

On arriving at his castle the Childe's wounds were examined, and found of less importance than was at first imagined; after a few days he was tolerably recovered.

During his confinement his thoughts had wandered upon events. He had ever been an admirer of Harold; but the feudal quarrel and jealousy of Earl Godwin had severed him from the son. He considered Godwin to be the murderer of Prince Alfred; and being himself at heart a man full of honesty and loyalty to the race of Cedric, he could not forgive the prince. But the son of Godwin was guiltless of the supposed crime; and the events of the last few days had brought Alfnoth to charitable and just thoughts as to his own obligations to Harold. Editha's love, now frankly avowed, had nearly decided him to become one of his most faithful friends. Harold's explanation of his conduct and feelings touched the patriotic heart of the Childe, and called forth all his attachment to his Saxon countryman.

One morning, as Editha sat beside him, he suddenly said, "Editha, we have both adopted the Christian faith; tell me then girl, for you are deeply read in the Holy Book, tell me, I say, is it lawful before God to consult a sorceress? We have ever held them in high estimation, and I see no reason why we should not; they tell men how to act with the wisdom of future knowledge."

"Father, I cannot better meet your question than by telling you that the Bible speaks of witches and sorcerers, and of inspired men called prophets. In some parts of that Holy Book they seem to be admitted, while in others they are forbidden; and my poor learning is not of sufficient depth, nor would it be seemly in a simple maiden, to give an opinion upon such awful matters. But it seems to me, dear father, that the Almighty God guards us and orders

Digitized by Google

all events; so it is wisest and best rather to abide their arrival than to ride out, as it were, to meet them. When they come, they come; and we, putting our trust in the Lord Jesus and the Holy Virgin, and in the Saints and all the relics which we possess, ought to abide the behests of the Deity."

"Perhaps Editha you are right; but the wisest may gain knowledge from an expert sorceress; and as the height of all wisdom is to foresee and propose, I think there can be no great sin in a Christian consulting a Vala. There is one named Frica, who, as you know, lives at her small strong tower in the bosom of the forest. Thence she goes to the castles of the great, and the dwellings of the humble. The Saxon people love and fear her; for few have ever incurred her anger that misfortune has not blighted them.

"I have never heard that any one has been allowed to enter her high tower; a dwarf attends her, and many large and ferocious dogs. What she needs she receives from Winchelsea; it is deposited in an outer dwelling, by the butcher of that town. Her riches are great, but secure. A band of robbers once assaulted her tower; they tried to loosen the stones at the base, but scarcely had they struck a dozen blows when the basket, by which she usually descended, was lowered from the top. It contained a square box.

"'If you want riches,' said the Vala from above, 'take them—Frica values them not.'

"The robbers collected round the box, and as the basket reascended, tried to open the lid with a battle-axe; it was but raised an inch, when an explosion like thunder took place, and three of the robbers fell dead, torn to pieces. Several others were dreadfully lacerated, and all were struck to earth amidst a thick smoke.

"'Great riches, but small profit, knaves!' cried the Vala, in a shrill voice of derision. 'Waes Hael!' added she, and a shower of boiling water fell upon the stricken men, who shrieked in agony.

"'What, no drinc Hael! uncourteous dogs? An I don't please ye, caitiffs, even get ye hence, or sorrow will betide ye, for I will let my imps out even now, and two legs must run fast if four can't catch 'em.'

Digitized by Google

"Those who were able fled, but ere they could escape, a small iron door at the foot of the tower was raised by an unseen hand, and forth rushed six furious dogs, pulling the fugitives down; soon a horn sounded from the tower, whereupon the dogs came back and killed the wounded men who lay there. The basket then again descended with the Vala; she tied a cord to the feet of the dead and, having kennelled her dogs, reascended.

"From the top she and her dwarf pulled each body up, then boiled them all and fed her dogs with the flesh. The skeletons she hung from the top of the tower, and such terror did she thereby strike through the country, that the army of King Edward would not attack that magic tower! Editha, to this Vala will I go, and pray her to visit us and tell our fate."

A messenger was accordingly despatched to the butcher of Winchelsea, who on his return from the tower said, "Frica thus replies to the Childe's message:—

"'Let Alfnoth come to the wood at night, before the hour of twelve. If he sees the tower dark, let him return; if not, then shall he remain and observe in silence; but he must be unattended, save by his daughter Editha, his own people, and a palfrey for me, which must wait at the outskirt of the wood.'"

The Childe, attended by some armed men, a led palfrey, Editha, and myself, proceeded that night to the tower: we reached the wood about eleven. Alfnoth and Editha dismounted, and leaving me in charge of the armed party, entered.

The night was dark, and the thickness of the trees made it so completely black, that it was with great difficulty the father and daughter proceeded. However, they reached the site of the tower and halted, alarmed by the fearful barking of fierce dogs within, while without all was quiet. Suddenly a loud explosion, which made Editha tremble, was heard, and a flash of fire illuminated all the wood,—then all was dark again. Yet still the barking of the dogs was heard.

"Be quiet ye curs!" exclaimed the sorceress within the tower, and silence reigned.

Digitized by Google

"Let us return, dearest father!" said Editha; "I am dreadfully frightened."

"No, girl! we are under the protection of the Vala—nothing dare hurt us."

"The holy Virgin protect us!" said Editha; "this is awful,—hark! I hear a step. O my father, let us go back! I fear me this is unhallowed work;" and she repeated in a low voice the sacred rhymes or paraphrase of the Lord's prayer, made by the Saxon pope, which was rife among that people:—

"Ure fadyr in heaven rich
Thy name be halyed ever lich,
Thou bring us thy michell blisse,
Als hit in heaven y-doe,
Evar in yearthe beene it also . . . "

A heavy step approached,—the Childe drew his sword.

"Who art thou that dares to enter the wood of the tower without leave of the Vala?" said Alfnoth, in a determined but not a loud voice.

"Harding," answered the intruder. "I heard you were to be here, and obtained the Vala's leave to join you; for, though believing you to be secure, Editha's safety is too dear to me to let her risk the dangers of this neighbourhood with so slender a train. Deeds are doing that you are a stranger to, brave Alfnoth; and men are abroad who might in their ignorance harm you."

A strong female voice now cried out, "Do friends or foes approach the castle of the Vala?"

"Friends! friends!" cried Harold; and as he spake a vivid flame arose on the summit of the tower, casting a deep blue light around, brilliant as the day, but giving a ghastly hue. The tower was high and smooth; at the top there was a door, and various narrow and grated windows were visible. A small house stood a few paces from the foot of the tower, and from the battlements of the latter hung the robbers' skeletons, which, with the stems of the oaks, the leaves, the branches, were all tipped with a blue silvery glare, while the deep black background of the forest marked the limit of the magic effulgence. The lovely Editha,

Digitized by Google

wrapped in a white tunic and resting on her father's iron-clad figure, which reflected the ghastly light, would have been like the good genius of the place, if her pallid face had not made her appear rather as a beautiful apparition from the dead.

"Fear not, Editha," said the Childe, "all here is safe!"

"Safe!" echoed a deep voice from amidst a cloud of smoke which had, as the blue splendour died away, arisen with a red flash and hissing noise. As it cleared off, the gigantic form of the sorceress appeared above the battlements; she seemed clothed in a silver robe sparkling with diamonds, for the eye could scarcely bear the brightness.

Motionless she stood, with hands high above her head, as if in the act of evocation.

"God and the Virgin defend me!" again uttered Editha. "I hope we are safe, but I like not these dismal, perhaps unlawful rites."

"Our ancestors held them, Editha," said her father; "but silence—look!"

As he said this, the basket of the tower ascended and disappeared, the light was extinguished, and darkness again prevailed.

"Harold!" cried a voice from the tower.

"Here stands Harding," was the reply; "Harold is in Ireland."

"Does the great Harold fear his friends? does he seek to hide himself from her from whom he cannot hide?" hissed the Vala.

"No," said Harold in a low tone, "but there may be other ears shrouded by the darkness, good Frica!"

"False! Who dares be here without leave from the Vala?" A pause ensued, and then the same voice called out, "Alfnoth."

"Here," said the Childe.

"Editha!"

"Here," she replied, trembling and crossing herself devoutly.

"You have a Norman with your party; let him come Be quick, Harold."

Digitized by Google

Darting off fast as the darkness would permit, he came to me, and I as quickly returned with him.

"Is the Norman come?" inquired the prophetess.

"Yes."

"Ragnaar, descendant of Lodbrog! Scandinavian by birth and lineage, of Norseman's blood the purest in Normandy! child of the sea, all hail and welcome!"

My companions marvelled much.

"Even so, great prophetess! The blood and lineage of my family have never been contaminated: such is my lineage."

"And such is the Vala's," said the sorceress. "Our stock is one; in all these lands none are so near to me in blood as Ragnaar, or, if he will, Mallet; but the new name is vile."

"Not so, good cousin; I gained it from my companions in arms, by good deeds and heavy blows struck in battle, and thus let it be."

"As you will, good knight; but the daughter of the North holds lightly the men of new names and new faith. Odin is my god. I worship the Walchyries; the evil genius of Loke I abominate, and I live in Asgaard when I pass from Midgaard. But few are they who are true! few are the heroes fit to quaff from the skull-cup in the halls of Odin! Answer not Ragnaar, my kinsman, for I fret and am sore vexed to see thou, who art a Scandinavian in blood and in stature, a Christian in faith and name."

"Boy," said the knight, "when I heard her thus speak, strong was my inclination to pull her tower down; but she was a woman, my kinswoman, and, by the mass! a crazy hag to boot, so I left her to her own way."

Here Sir William crossed himself, ejaculated a Paternoster, and continued the narrative.

"Now," again rose the voice of the prophetess, "what is the pleasure of Alfnoth, Childe of Sussex, with the Vala Frica?"

"Powerful and highly-descended Vala, you well know how many troubles beset the land, you know that many beset me; my head is weak to judge, and confiding in——" Here the Childe hesitated.

Digitized by Google

"God!" cried Editha.

"Odin!" said the Vala sternly.

"In the God of peace and of war," cried Harold; for the Saxon hero, though he held lightly the religion of his ancestors and the incantations of the prophetess, knew the value of both in the great enterprise on which his commanding spirit was bent.

"Even so," continued Alfnoth; "and my mission here is to pray, most wise and excellent Vala who knoweth all things, that thou comest to my castle of Bodiam and there partake of my hospitality, for such time as thou deemest good unto thee, and there to say what good or evil hangeth over the house of Alfnoth."

"Have you a palfrey, good Sir Childe?"

"Yea, lady, certes, and a gentle one; even that of my daughter Editha."

"Then abide ye awhile, and ye shall have my company."

A quarter of an hour elapsed, during which all was in utter darkness; but soon a blaze of fire made every object visible, and the Vala stood before them.

She was of an extraordinary and commanding stature, large of bone and meagre, but of an upright portly presence; her face was fair, of a reddish hue and freckled; her features regular, but of a severity approaching ferocity; her eyes were grey, almost blue, small, but when fixed—and they moved not with that frequent and unsteady quickness which is so often noticed in such strange and observant people—the eyeballs stood out and showed the white all round. Her fine brow was broad, high and prominent, but deeply wrinkled horizontally; her nose was aquiline and sharp upon the ridge; her thin lips compressed, marking habitual ill-temper and violence of disposition. Her voice unharmonious, was deliberate and oracular; unpleasing, but emphatic, absorbing the attention. She seemed one whose sex was more designated by her attire than by nature, which had so fashioned her, that whatever garb she donned she might pass for male or female accordingly.

Her dress was as striking as her appearance. A light blue tunic descended below her knees; the cape, buttoned round her throat, was studded with globes of glass, and on

Digitized by Google

each glass were cut mystical characters. A band of black sheepskin, lined and edged with that of a white cat, confined her thick and long silvery hair, which fell like an avalanche down her back and over each shoulder. From her zone, which was a large serpent's skin studded with precious stones all marked with cabalistic signs, was suspended a large bag containing her instruments of magic. Her sandals were of untanned calfskin, tied with long thongs, which were again fastened with buckles of bright steel. She held a wand, hung with many charms, and at the end of it was a globe formed of a human skull set in a cup of crystal.

"Are you ready to depart friend?" said the Vala.

"Yes," replied Alfnoth.

"Then will I call my guards; fear not, gentle damsel, they will not harm ye. Ho! Vafthrudner!"

A deep low bark from a dog within answered.

"Ho! Gangrader!" And again the answer was a similar growl.

Then the small door of the tower opened, and forth stalked Vafthrudner and Gangrader, in all the majesty of canine dignity. They were heavy-looking animals, of enormous size, such as are seen in the Alps; but these seemed more fierce. Their paws were white, their coats a reddish ground with dark spots, and their flat broad heads were more like tigers' than lions'. First they licked the feet and hands of the Vala, and then walked with slow and stately steps round the strangers, smelling each, and as it were making acquaintance.

The Vala mounted the palfrey and flung the reins over its head to the dogs, who took them in their mouths and walked before, leading the horse. Thus they reached the castle, and the Vala retired to her chamber with the animals, having first ordered a peculiar dish to be prepared for herself at supper.

At the end of the great eating-room, on a raised platform, the repast was soon placed, and Alfnoth gently tapped at the door of the prophetess. "I come," she said, and straightway appearing was, by the Childe, led to the supper-room, her dogs following close. On reaching the platform she ordered the chair placed for her to be removed,

Digitized by Google

and herself set down a tripod carried in the mouth of one of her dogs; the legs were of bones, the seat was the skin of an ancient Briton, killed by one of her ancestors in fight.

Eating in presence of the assembled household, all gazing at her in silence, she slowly consumed her prepared dish. Having finished, she took a crystal bowl filled with goat's milk and rose up to bless the house, but doing so overturned the tripod. Pale, deathly pale, then became her face, and she dropped the bowl, which shivered to pieces. Harold replaced the tripod; but the Vala trembled violently, and all but the Saxon chief stood aghast.

"Danger! danger approaches," she said in deep terrified tone. "Give me mead!" A bowl was presented by Alfnoth, while Editha fervently kissed a small crucifix.

"That avails not! that avails not!" cried the Vala; "Virgin with the neck of a swan! Virgin with the braided golden hair! that avails not! The power of the hateful Loke prevails over my god and thine! This night I will look no farther into fate, nor seek the will of Odin." Then drinking the mead, she drew forth a pencil and a bit of parchment, wrote some words, and called "Vafthrudner! Gangrader!" Their huge heads were instantly raised in expectation. Hie thee good dogs! Hie thee swift with this to Alvise the dwarf, and return as swiftly—but stop! Give meat to my messengers, they have much to do." Rapidly the dogs devoured what was brought, and the Vala, who had been sitting with eyes on vacancy, tied the parchment to Vafthrudner's collar, pointed to the door, and in a low voice said, "Begone!" Both dogs rushed out.

"Lower the drawbridge, Harding," cried Alfnoth.

"Let your drawbridge remain up; who or what shall stop the charmed messengers of the Vala in their course?" and Frica frowned.

The noble dogs plunged from an open casement into the deep moat beneath, and swimming across were far on their way in a few moments.

The people of the castle now retired to rest, more or less affected by the untoward events of the night as they were given to belief in the Vala's incantations.

Digitized by Google

As the warden looked from the tower next morning at dawn, he saw the two dogs descending the hills, carrying a heavy box which they alternately took from each other.

The drawbridge was lowered, and they went straight to Frica's chamber, which was opened to them.

"Good dogs!" said she, kissing the head of each, "ye are sorely spent. Let them be fed quickly, for their guerdon has been hardly earned."

When meat and drink came, she mixed a powder with the one and a liquor with the other, and immediately the animals seemed as fresh as if they had not quitted the castle.

"Now sleep varlets!" said she, and the dogs lay down in a corner.

"Hah! we will invoke Odin," muttered the Vala. "Let none disturb me for some hours."

At an hour before midnight a terrific explosion shook Bodiam Castle to its foundations, and terror fell upon all. A rush to the Vala's door ensued, but they found her standing with great composure.

"Harold! Alfnoth! Editha! ye have called me to tell your fates. My power to answer depends upon the will of Odin; but know that I have no power to hide or avert the evil which he may choose to reveal. Are your hearts resolved to hear, and to bear the future? It is now in your power to remain ignorant of that future, and abide your fate in darkness. But it will not be in my power, nor in yours, to bury in oblivion that which has once been revealed. Reflect, then answer."

"O father! dearest father!" cried Editha, in terror, "ask her not, seek not fate—abide all things, trusting in God."

"Trembling witch!" cried Harold, with a sternness he well knew how to assume with those who attempted to trifle with his courage and firmness, and of which the Vala herself stood in awe; "I care not what Odin says; my course is declared, and despite of Odin, or with his help, I will pursue it. The trusty retainers of this house are all faithful Saxons; they know why I am here, and that a few days will tell the fate of Harold. Let Odin speak; the

Digitized by Google

steps of Harold may be arrested, but shall not be turned; the good of the Saxons is his object, and the God of the Saxons will aid him."

"Excellent Vala proceed," broke in Alfnoth; "the fears of the swan-necked Editha cannot shake the heart of Alfnoth. Editha, my beloved! it is weak to fear; there is no harm in seeking for that, which if the God of Christians thinks fit to forbid, we cannot find."

"Then enter," said the Vala, "and let none speak."

Harold, Alfnoth, Editha, and myself entered, and the door of the chamber closed. Darkness concealed the Vala.

In a few minutes a diffused misty light, which trembled in the air, appeared afar off and was gradually condensed into a sort of medallion of bright light. It increased to the size of a plate, and shadows seemed to form upon its surface. Soon the face of Harold became distinct, and on his head there seemed to be a crown, dropping with gore; beneath lay an arrow, also stained with blood. The image approached, progressively enlarging to a great size, and on coming close to them, Editha exclaimed "O God! preserve him!"

The phantom vanished, but Editha had fainted in the arms of Harold, who bore her out of the room. She quickly revived, but would not again enter. Harold however laughed at the vision, and returned.

The small light again began to tremble, again it condensed itself, then expanded and approached, once more assuming a pictorial appearance. The face was now that of a stranger, and very stern. His head sustained a brilliant crown, twisted with laurels; while below, in the same place where the bloody arrow lay under the head of Harold, there was a bent bow without arrows.

"Who have we here?" said Harold. The vision disappeared.

The next moment the light reappeared, and the head of Alfnoth became visible; it was pale in death, and beneath was a broken battle-axe.

"By the head of Mimer!" said Alfnoth, "but a man must die somehow, and a battle-axe is as good as a bed."

Again the light vanished, and again the small medallion

Digitized by Google

trembled in the air; it approached, bearing on its surface the whole figure of Editha. She was kneeling, her hands were clasped in prayer, and the bloody arrow lay before her.

Neither Harold nor Alfnoth spoke, and the vision fled. Then the voice of the Vala was heard, low and mournful.

"Beyond this Odin will not go. Ye have seen the signs, more is not permitted, be satisfied, let me be gone."

We left the chamber, and shortly afterwards the Vala mounted Editha's palfrey, and, guarded by her dogs, departed. She was attended by Alfnoth, Harold, a groom, and some men-at-arms, and when they left her at the tower—"Beware, beware! That tripod fell not without cause, mischief awaits you," she cried aloud.

"Strange," said Alfnoth, as they rode together. "Strange are these visions, Earl Harold."

"No, Childe Alfnoth, they seem simple to expound. I am to die by an arrow, and the knight who is to slay me is he of the bow, and a fierce daring warrior he seems."

"But the bloody crown?" said Alfnoth.

"Ho!" replied Harold; "that I am to gain a bloody victory; and this stranger, who is probably some one of our good friends from Norway, Danemarke, or Sweden, is to slay me, just as I am crowned with victory: his crown of precious stones shows that he is a king already, and gained his laurels without losing his blood—just the reverse of mine. You, also, seem doomed to die in battle, and what better can we hope or wish for brave Alfnoth. Let our cause be just, and then—why let us die the death of warriors. For my part, it is what I pray for. The fate of dear Editha touches me differently; she will see us fall, and without our protection may suffer great indignity. Her grieving over the arrow is too clear an indication of her fate, and makes my heart bleed; but if, as I believe, there is truth in the doctrine of the Roman church, the great God will surely protect one so virtuous."

In this mood they reached the castle. It was dark ere they entered the yard, and Editha, when they dismounted, threw her arms round her father's neck, saying,—

"Oh, how I rejoice that the Vala is gone. I was foolish this morning, dear father, but of late my spirits have been

Digitized by Google

so tried that melancholy, impossible to account for, fell upon me. It is gone—Earl Harold and yourself will forgive my weakness."

"Ay my Editha! and the more willingly that my own spirits have rather flagged. But let us forget all this, and to supper, for we are hungered with our ride."

They were hardly seated at table when a horn sounded a parley; its tones loud and clear echoed through the silent valley of the Rother, and its last notes reverberated from the hills, as if the Night said there is none here to answer. But there was a speedy answer from the castle; for scarcely had the echoes melted away than the warder blew his blast, as loud and as challenging as was the appeal. All was now hushed within the walls, and every ear was on the alert, for the parley might be from a foe, though it seemed that of a knight demanding hospitality. Soon a loud voice was heard,—

"Courteous warder, say to the valiant and noble castellan that a knight craves hospitality for himself and his party."

"Sir knight I crave your name and numbers. The noble castellan, Alfnoth, Childe of Sussex, delights to honour strangers; but caution must bear company with generous welcome, for the times are rude and deceptive."

"William, duke of Normandy!" replied the voice; "and accompanied by two English earls, Radulph and Leofric, with a small retinue of esquires and grooms. Our other followers are gone to seek quarters in the neighbouring village, in charge of knights sent by the king to do honour to his cousin."

"Noble Earl Leofric, I know your voice right well. The battle-axe has grown heavy for old Colgrin's hand, but it was light as a feather when he wielded it at your side in the battle of Scearstan."

"Excellent and brave old Colgrin, I well remember you, and we will talk of our old wars; for which reason I pray you hasten to your lord, and let us enter."

A few minutes elapsed when "Lower the drawbridge" resounded from within. Freely then ran the chain with a sharp clattering roll, and the ponderous bridge fell with a heavy sound. The voice of Colgrin arose, loud as his old lungs permitted,—

Digitized by Google

"Advance knights, and welcome to the castle of Bodiam, appertaining to the Childe of Sussex;" the remainder was lost in the clatter of horses' feet crossing the drawbridge. In the yard a numerous body, armed, with Alfnoth at their head, received the duke; for though they knew the voice of the earl, great caution was prudent—and indeed it always is, boy, for our castles are never safe without such care; therefore did two armed men stand at the bridge to count numbers, and at need to make the warder drop the portcullis.

Harold could trust all the Saxons of the Childe, for the poor were enthusiastically attached to him throughout the land, and especially in Kent and Sussex; but it may be easily supposed that he avoided William, towards whom, however, he had, at that time, no hostile feelings; he was besides, on the point of being closely connected by marriage, insomuch as the sister of Matilda was about to be united to Harold's brother Tostig. William was come to assist the king against Earl Godwin, an need were; yet Harold would willingly have discovered himself to the Norman, and sought his mediation with Edward, were it not that those attending the Norman duke were men to whom Harold could not show himself without great danger to Alfnoth and Editha, as well as to himself. From Ingulph, William's secretary, no disguise could hide him, nor did he fear Ingulph, for he, from his earliest years, had been protected by Harold's sister, Queen Editha. The rest of William's party he did fear, and therefore remained concealed. Alfnoth alone met William.

At their first accost, Alfnoth started back.

"Ha! what see you in me, sir ealdorman, to make you start?" said William, laughing.

The Childe recovered his presence of mind as suddenly as he had lost it.

"Noble duke, well may I start to see so famed and chivalrous a knight so youthful and so handsome! It is true that your noble figure justly corresponds to the report of your personal prowess; but accustomed to hear of the Norman rule and Norman wars as things evincing the profoundest experience and the wisdom of age, it was natural for me

Digitized by Google

to start on seeing the youthful head from which such deep policy has for years issued."

"Most courteous sir, I thank you!" said the duke, smiling; but for the start, he could not in his own mind satisfactorily account. William had a suspicious temper.

The party now ascended to supper. Alfnoth took the chief seat, in all the pride of Saxon hospitality; Editha was at his side. On her right sat William, in armour, but unhelmed.

"Fair Saxon damsel," said he, "pardon this rude warlike dress; but, by my troth, your English air so whets the appetite, that no mind had I to doff my mail, when your noble father pressed me to meet you even thus. *Grand Merci*, lady! deem not that we shaven and smooth-chinned Normans are neglectful of the politeness due to dames! Judge not the Normans by their rude duke, but rather by my brave and polite vassal there, Sir William Mallet."

"The dress you are in, noble duke," replied Editha, "is the dress of honour. We Saxon women think no dress more becomes a warrior than his mail."

"Ay!" joined in Alfnoth; "and the more so when the warrior so becomes his mail."

"Thanks noble maid, and you also, brave Childe of Sussex. But I know not why you so honour warriors in England, under a king, good but so peaceable," said William, smiling somewhat sarcastically. "You surely have little need of them, now that the violent Earl Godwin has left your shore with his valiant son Harold. I would fain meet that youthful Saxon hero, of whose prowess and nobleness I have heard great laud. His fame spreads far and wide; 'tis pity his father's violence against my cousin Edward and our Normans keeps him away."

Editha's colour came and went during this speech, scarcely could she breathe; but the praise bestowed upon her lover enabled her to regain self-possession.

"Yes," answered Alfnoth; "it is true, sir duke, that these quarrels in the king's family are unfortunate, but we hope they will soon cease."

"I fear me that my Norman subjects are not liked in England, Sir Childe. Yet 'tis pity, for we are closely allied

Digitized by Google

in many ways, and I would fain draw our alliance closer. The intercourse of people does good to all parties, and my fiery, often unruly subjects, would learn more peaceful and gentle habits from you Saxons, who are so obedient to the good king. Much do I admire the Saxon character; it is brave and generous; and your nobles are more worthy of their sovereign's confidence than my Norman galliards. Were I in Edward's place, I would put all my confidence in the Saxon chiefs, and much I marvel at his confidence in the Normans. I would willingly change with him, and give your Saxon lords fiefs in my dominions, but for one reason; namely, that I hold it to be the duty of sovereigns to give all places of power and honour to the natives of a country. Were I king of England, none but Saxons should hold power; and being master of Normandy, none but Normans shall bear sway in Normandy. It is true that your king is half Norman in blood, but that signifies nothing; he is on a Saxon throne, and holds no sway in Normandy—that is enough; his Saxons alone should surround him. Were I a Saxon—and by the mass! I am close akin to Saxon kings—I would still say to Saxons in Normandy, 'Go ye back to your own land, for here ye must not bide; I have much to bestow, but there are many to receive; it is their patrimony, and I cannot grant it unto you. Think ye not so, noble ealdormen?"

Saying this, William fixed his scrutinizing eyes alternately on the Childe, on Radulph, and on Leofric.

"Even as thou sayest, noble duke," replied Alfnoth.

"What think ye, sirs?" continued the duke, addressing the others.

"What the king does is well done," said Radulph. "Our Norman friends are bold and strong in battle, courteous at court, and of great knowledge when compared to us rude Saxons. I, therefore, think that the king doeth wisely."

"Yes in truth," said Leofric, "the king is a wise prince; but yet, with exception of the count of Boulogne, as the king's brother-in-law, I hold the duke of Normandy speaks justly. 'Twere well we had not too many Normans, and the Saxons would be better pleased. Earl Godwin is wrong, but Harold would then be less violent; he has more prudence

Digitized by Google

than his father and brother; he loves the king and the people; and though he would rather see fewer Normans in power, he would be courteous to them as strangers."

"By the rood!" said William, "but the earl speaks well; and it would greatly please me to make peace between the king and Earl Harold."

William remained the following day, and there was high feasting and full, according to the custom of the Saxons. The morning after, the duke departed, leaving all the nobles well pleased with his courteous manners. But previously an incident had taken place that greatly moved Alfnoth, and somewhat interrupted the harmonious feelings of the Saxons.

The earl, with Duke William and a large party of guests, were walking on the walls, when a large stag, which seemed to lead the herd, approached nearer than the rest.

"By the mass!" said William, "that stag is bravely crowned."

"Yes," said Alfnoth, laughing; "but he is doomed because his antlers are so large."

"He seems to like us, and approaches to make closer acquaintance," observed Leofric. "But see! he is cautious, and keeps out of bowshot from the castle."

"He is right," quoth the castellan, "for if my venerer sees him near enough he would be in danger."

"Sir Childe, thou knowest best the flight of a Saxon shaft," remarked the duke; "but a Norman arrow would reach him now from these battlements."

"Nay not so! noble duke; there is no bow in France or Normandy that would strike that deer from hence. Craving your pardon, the slope of the hill deceives thine eye."

"Verily good castellan thou shouldst better judge the flight of arrows from thine own castle-walls. I wager thee a hundred golden byzants that I shoot beyond the beast, and one hundred more that I bring him down."

"A gage, a gage! and for two hundred golden byzants!" cried many voices.

"Be it so," said Alfnoth, "for I would willingly see your skill, and will double the gage upon your shot."

"Four hundred then," replied the duke: "bring me my bow, sir page."

Digitized by Google

"Let my venerer string it for you, Duke William."

"Yes, kind earl; but if he does, he has no weak arm I ween."

The strong huntsman took the tough bow in hand, but it resisted all his force. He was an athletic Saxon, and threw the whole weight of his muscular frame into action, yet in vain. Furious at the amusement of the company, he cast down the bow, swearing that "no man there—duke, or earl, or ceorl, would string the weapon."

I smiled, good Wace, for the great strength of the duke was known to me.

"Say ye so, friend?" said William, while a laughing consciousness of his own vigour seemed to tine exultingly in the corner of his sparkling eye; "then your master's good English cheer must have strangely weakened my arm, and I shall begin to fear that some enchantment besides that of the Lady Editha's eyes reigns in this castle."

The duke took the bow and strung it with ease. The huntsman and the company admired his extraordinary strength; but their amazement was great when they saw the Norman chief with a gradual steady pull discharge the arrow. The bow quivered as the shaft left it, whizzing through the air, and striking the animal full in the eye, laid it dead upon the field. The herd fled in terror, and a shout of admiration arose from the battlements.

When the stag fell, Duke William stood for a moment like the god of archery, contemplating the fatal effect of his death-bearing missile; then, turning to the Childe, he gracefully placed the bow horizontally across his breast, looking over it. His countenance was grave, for he had been anxious not to miss his mark before the Saxons; but as he turned, a merry Saxon dame, who had come to the feast, her fine hair decked with a mock diadem, playfully took the circlet off, and, placing it on the head of William, cried out, "Crown the victor, damsels; he is the prince of archers as well as of Normandy."

The Childe grew pale: it was the crowned head and bow he had seen in the chamber!

"You have lost your byzants, noble earl," said the duke; "and did I not know that you are both rich and reckless of

Digitized by Google

money, the thought would come that you were not indifferent to the loss of your gold, for you change colour."

"Pardon, high duke; it is my jealous Saxon blood that left my cheeks, unwilling to avow that no English arm could draw that Norman bow."

"Neither can any Norman arm," replied William. "I never yet met an archer that could."

"The deed is wonderful," growled the huntsman; "such shooting my eyes never saw before."

As he spoke, a loud, prolonged scream burst from the woods below, and the words, "Odin! Odin! a stranger seals the Saxons' doom!" were distinctly heard. All present stood amazed and horror-stricken.

"Hark!" said Alfnoth; "hark!"

"'Tis strange," added William; "the voice seemed unearthly."

As he spoke, the dogs of the Vala sprung from the wood, and seizing the body of the stag, bore if off, bounding like tigers; and again the voice shrieked aloud, "*Nameth yure Seax!*"

"What means all this, Sir Childe?" asked the Norman, habitually alive to sudden dangers.

"I know not, sir duke; but a cunning sorceress dwells not far from hence, and those were her dogs. The voice, too methinks was hers: 'tis very strange!"

Shouts of anger were now heard echoing through the woods, where crowds of idle ceorls had collected to see the duke, but had concealed themselves out of respect to the Childe. But then a man was seen to issue from the castle with the speed of a horse; his course was so swift that few could recognize him, but those few thought he was Harding. When he entered the woods the sounds of discontent died away.

"By the rood!" said one of the Norman gentlemen, "that ceorl runs swiftly."

"Ay! ay!" replied Elstan, the huntsman, rudely; "he is a Saxon!"

"Are the Saxons famous for running?" rejoined the Norman sarcastically.

"Yes by Odin! they are, when they chase a Norman."

Digitized by Google

"Such a hunt you never joined in," said his opponent angrily, "old as you seem to be in your trade."

"No, but I willingly would!"

"Be civil, ceorl!" cried the Childe, turning fiercely on the huntsman; "let me hear no Saxon rudeness to our gallant Norman guests."

"I admit," said the Norman, resuming his good humour, "that I never saw a man run so swiftly as he who just now entered the wood."

Leofric here joined in the conversation. "Earl Harold, the queen's brother, can, when armed, outrun any man in his army, though the latter be unarmed; the blood of Harefoot is strong in his veins."

"Ay," again interrupted Elstan, "and no man strikes heavier with a battle-axe; *he* never fights afar off with bows and arrows."

"Silence caitiff!" broke in Alfnoth; "wouldst thou have me cast thee from the battlements into the moat?"

The gentle Editha here put her hand upon the shoulder of the sturdy Elstan, and made him depart; muttering, however, between his teeth, "An I were cast from the battlements, one of these long-shanked Norman galliards should go with me."

The politic and suspicious William was startled at all that had passed; he remained absorbed in reflection for a time, and a gloom seemed cast over the whole company. But soon the gaieties of the day were resumed, and the matter passed from the minds of all but William, Alfnoth, and Editha.

"Father," said she, "I cannot sustain my spirits; know ye not that I saved that stag from Elstan the huntsman?"

"And why, Editha?"

"The animal was so bold and handsome that the ceorls around called it 'Harold;' for this Elstan and I agreed that it should not die. There is a jealousy about this among the people, which was assuaged by Harold, who, as you saw, left the castle for that purpose. It were well if the Normans wended their way from hence; I fear me we shall not find their sojourn agreeable. I like them not."

"They go to-morrow, and God speed them. Editha, my

Digitized by Google

child, I am all Saxon; I feel it. Oh! that ever I could have cherished these strangers. By the blood of my fathers! were Godwin himself here I could embrace him."

Editha's Saxon heart rejoiced to hear these words, and she threw herself into the Childe's arms.

The morrow came, Duke William departed, and the Childe was again a Saxon!

It may here be useful to posterity, said Sir William Mallet, that I should here briefly notice the curious matters which brought the Norman duke to England, and which have since afforded much food for conjecture.

After gaining the battle of Valmery, or the Val des Dunes, the enemies of Duke William were for awhile quiet, and he remained undisputed master of Neustria, the land of his ancestors and his own just inheritance, twice secured to his race by the sword; for the glaive of Rollo won it from France for the Normans, the sword of William recovered it from rebels. He now, therefore, began to contemplate his claims to other countries; for just it is that no great sovereign should let his weapons rust in the hall of his forefathers while aught that his blood is heir to be left neglected. William's claims to England (his cousin, Edward the Confessor, having no issue) are well known, and brevity forbids me to repeat them.

Godwin, earl of Kent, had caused Edward to marry his daughter Editha, and in that quarter there arose great danger to the pretensions of Duke William. Now it so happened that just as the latter potentate had quieted his dukedom of Normandy by his victory at Val des Dunes, Earl Godwin had quarrelled with his son-in-law, Edward, king of England, and the Norman at once offered his assistance to drive the earl, with his renowned son Harold, into banishment. William of Normandy was too acute a politician not to see the advantage of seizing this moment to gain favour in Edward's eyes, and with a large fleet he passed rapidly to England; but Godwin had already been defeated by the king, so William, leaving his fleet, passed on to London to visit his royal cousin.

During this visit the Norman so ingratiated himself into the good opinion of Edward, that the Confessor made over

Digitized by Google

to the duke the inheritance of the kingdom. This was done by a secret testament, which was afterwards destroyed, probably by Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury, on Harold's succession, and, therefore, could not be exhibited by the Conqueror in after-days. But as this treaty was a secret of state, of which no proofs can now be given, so nothing transpired at the time, and the conqueror of Hastings found a sufficient title in that battle without seeking to bring before the world proofs—which, had they existed, must have fallen into his hands when he entered London—of the testament made by King Edward.

The present peaceful visit to London made by the astute William appeared one of ceremony and family courtesy, and, being occupied by mere feasts and light pleasures, would be more becoming the pages of a pleasant romaunt than of my serious and instructive history; therefore I shall pass over such details, and merely state that Duke William, after he left Bodiam Castle, returned in safety to Rouen.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Showeth for ruling a sulky king,
Two strong fleets are just the thing;
Such ruling however he will pay back,
For kings have always got that knack.
Harold for gentle Edith doth bid,
But the king proposes a widow instead.

It is now time to follow up the account of Harold and Editha.

Particulars of the Saxon events are not generally known to me; but the Childe of Sussex, having become Saxon in his politics, agreed to the marriage of Harold and Editha when the king's permission could be obtained, being resolved to forget his jealousies of Earl Godwin, and to assist in reconciling the rebels to their liege lord; this was soon after accomplished, for Count Godwin arrived from Flanders with a powerful fleet, which was joined by one from Ireland under

Digitized by Google

Harold. The united squadrons sailing up the Thames, passed under the southern arch of London Bridge, cast anchor, and the two chiefs sent their submission to King Edward; which by the intercession and able policy of Stigand, bishop of Winchester, was received, and a pardon granted by their excellent sovereign.

Upon the reception of Godwin and Harold into favour, the Norman intruders fled in all directions, to escape from the kingdom. The two prelates, Robert, archbishop of Canterbury, and Ulph, bishop of Dorchester, being stalwart knights, cut their way, at the head of their followers to Ness, in Essex, where, finding a small and miserable boat, they leaped into it, and cast themselves upon the mercy of the winds and waves.

Earl Godwin gave his son Wulfnoth, and his nephew Haco, as hostages to King Edward, who sent them to Normandy, there to be kept by his cousin Duke William.

Queen Editha, daughter of Godwin, and sister to the heroic Harold, was recalled from her state of disgrace, and again placed upon the throne.

Soon after these events, Earl Godwin died an awful death, of which, Master Robert Wace, I do not wish to speak: men say that it was a judgment of God; and truly boy, so I believe are most of the deaths that men do die; nor is it clear to me—I speak it with holy reverence—how any man can die, unless the hand of God be upon him.

Here the knight devoutly cast up his eyes to heaven, and, crossing himself, thus proceeded:—

Harold now stood high and unrivalled in the king's favour. His character was virtuous, foreseeing, and courageous; ambitious he was, but it was the ambition of a patriot. During the life of the Confessor, his ambition never made him seek to overthrow that virtuous sovereign, whose single fault, in Saxon eyes, was the love he bore to the Normans, among whom his youth had been passed. To this weakness the earls Godwin and Harold were strongly opposed; for in truth, all the personal feelings of the great chiefs, every national feeling, and all the sentiments which actuate mankind collectively and individually, were roused in the Saxon people against this weakness of the Con-

Digitized by Google

fessor—a weakness which, but for his glorious character in other respects, would probably have dethroned him. But who could overthrow a king whose throne was in the hearts of his subjects? Who could overthrow a king who abolished taxes, and left the fruits of his people's labour in their pockets? His characteristics were peace, economy, and justice. None could overthrow a king so beloved, and Harold never wished to do so; he honoured his liege lord and brother-in-law. And the sovereign, confident in the courage and fidelity of his great vassal, intrusted him with the command of the Saxon armies on all occasions when the people were roused to arms against the incursions of the predatory Welsh, or to quell internal insurrection created by the oppression of the mighty lords of the realm—but Harold did not march to support the oppressor, he moved to defend the oppressed.

Such was the good and justly beloved King Edward the Confessor; such was the loyalty, such the ambition, of that active and master-spirit, who succeeded to the throne of England by the choice of the Saxon people! Yea, verily, good clerk, I, William Mallet, the faithful servant of the Conqueror say it, that Harold was a gallant knight, and a great sovereign; he wanted but one thing—fortune!

Harold, being thus in the height of power, was sent against Griffith, king of the Welsh, who was ravaging the West country. In this expedition Harold displayed all the high qualities of an able commander and a hardy soldier, which in those days were characters more intimately connected than at present.

At the close of the campaign Harold slew Griffith; and the Confessor, to honour his victorious general, sent him orders to marry the widowed queen of Wales, Algitha, daughter of Earl Leofric! Harold demurred; he demanded the hand of his beautiful Editha. The king refused; Harold quitted the court, and went to Bodiam Castle, but Alfnoth would not consent to oppose the will of the king.

"Editha!" said Harold, "will you be mine, and leave these old dotards to rave at their leisure? I heed not their anger. Are we to be sacrificed to the folly of these grey-

Digitized by Google

beards? Let your consent be given, and by Odin, and all the heroes of the Valhalla! but their consent shall follow though it choke them."

"Harold!" said Editha.

"Stop, stop!" cried Harold, "dear Editha, I see in your beauteous face a sermon on duty of vassal and daughter to king-lord and to father, and to punish me for calling them 'old dotards;' pardon! pardon! oh, I recant! I recant! the culprit is penitent! the youthful Edward is all that is charming, and your father a lively youth of promising abilities, like young Ingulph the small philosopher! Come, Editha! don't be all gravity and offended dignity."

Saying this, he took her beautiful hands and kissed them, while Editha, who in truth was as provoked as himself, smiled and forgave him.

"But," said Editha! "I will not oppose my father, nevertheless."

"I do not ask you to do so, Editha; what I want is, that you should coax him into a consent to our private marriage, and leave me to deal with the king. The king both loves and fears me; he must and shall consent."

"That I will do, dear Harold; but in good truth Harold I doubt myself; I fear to sanction by my conduct any breach of the king's orders and pleasure. You are all to me, but you are all to the Saxons likewise; and, merciful God! what is to become of us if you be again driven into exile? Oh, better! far better for me to be your soul-pledged love, your own devoted Editha, and beholding you daily honoured by all men, the hope, the glory of the Saxons, than be the cause of your disgrace and exile. Harold! I would follow you to the utmost bounds of the earth, and share your dangers; but then, your dangers, and your suffering, and your loss of power, must be the work of fate, not of Editha, or she could not live. I, Harold—I Editha, the cause of your disgrace! oh, never! never shall that day come, and never will I be your wife to wed you to evil; let me be your good, your help, or let me be dead. But dear Harold, let not these dreadful evils haunt us! let us live as we have hitherto done. The king will surely relent; we shall work some change by our obedience;

Digitized by Google

Edward is good, and of a gentle nature. He will permit our union when that odious daughter of Leofric knows you reject her love."

"But dear Editha," said Harold laughing, "Algitha never pretended to love me."

"The public voice says she does, Harold, and I believe it, and think it infamous to love you who killed her husband; she ought to reject your hand, though Edward were to order her a thousand times to marry you."

"Then give me yours, Editha, for if the king's commands can be broken in one case, they can in another," said Harold, laughing.

"Go to, Harold, I like not this joking."

"Well then Editha, my beloved, what shall we do?"

"You Harold shall remain at court, winning favour with the king; I will urge my father also to press Edward,—your sister is our friend, and thus let us abide the will of God."

"And so am I to grow as old as a Druid, looking wistfully all my days at the Lady Editha! By the skulls of Asgaard! no! this will do for a year, an you will have it so, fair damsel."

"Well my Harold, be it but for a year, and then——"

"You will marry me, Editha, eh?"

"Man, man, don't urge me thus; you know your power; let us see what the year will bring, and then decide as we best can."

Harold took Editha's hands, and said,—

"Editha! before our new God, and in the name of Odin, and by all that men hold sacred, this day year you shall be mine, or Harold's thread of life shall be cut."

The solemnity with which Harold uttered these words, the tone of resolution in which they were spoken, and, above all, his known firmness of purpose in all that he resolved, rushed to Editha's mind with a fearful, yet delightful feeling that she should be his; but then the horrid apparition of the Vala rushed to her imagination and she shuddered.

"What makes you tremble, Editha?"

"The horrid vision of the sorceress, Harold. O God! oh, why did I consent to see it!"

Digitized by Google

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Harold impatiently, "does my good and wise Editha believe in our new God, and yet fear the incantations of that old hag and her devilish imps? Drive her and her visions from your mind, Editha—they are idle dreams. I use the mad witch as a tool to guide the mass of the Saxon people, who believe in her power; I make her instrumental to their good, for if inimical to me she could greatly injure all my plans; but you, my adored Editha, must laugh as her prophecies as I do."

Editha smiled mournfully; the impression made by the sorceress was too powerful for reason or religion, and the face of the swan-necked and braided Editha was pale. Harold suddenly caught her in his arms, and pressed her to his breast; this quickly brought the colour back abundantly to her cheeks, suffused with blushes produced by offended modesty, and she was about to lecture her lover, when her father entered.

"Earl Harold," said the Childe, "I am loth to break the laws of Saxon hospitality towards the meanest ceorl, much more loth am I to do so towards one so high in dignity as yourself, great chief and favoured gesith of the king; but thou well knowest that dalliance here with Editha comports not with thy grandeur, nor with the damsel's fair fame; she is in the king-lord's wardship, and he has, as yet, refused the license for your marriage. Now therefore, sir earl, go thy ways; sojourn not in my castle. In thine own stronghold of Bosenham on the coast thou mayest await thy time to gain the king's consent, and we are not far distant, so that our greetings may be frequent without detriment to the maiden's good repute and high lineage; and we can, without suspicion, arrange such plans as may be meet to prevent the return of the Normans."

"Noble Alfnoth, be it even as thou desirest," said Harold, and taking leave of Editha he forthwith departed for his castle of Bosenham, where he disported himself with fishing and hawking.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIX.

When men for pleasure go to sea,
Storms and troubles they may see:
Ponthieu's count, a sordid knave,
Draws Harold from the surging wave.

In one of Harold's excursions from Bosenham, he embarked on board a large boat, accompanied by a slender retinue with dogs and hawks of high price.

He had not been long on board ere a strong wind arose.

"The squall freshens," observed Harold; "it seems threatening, and the sea gets up fast; take down the reef, and haul the boat up close."

"Ay, ay, most noble earl," said his chief boatman, and the vessel ran under a treble-reefed lug, but made little or no headway, and the black clouds gathered thick above the horizon, which was strangely obscured, the haze thickening. Thunder rolled in the welkin, and the arch of heaven became every instant more shaded by the bellying vapours, while the foamy spoondrift emphatically warned the mariners of coming destruction.

"By the shoulder of thy horse, sir earle," exclaimed an aged boatman, "we are lost! she makes no headway, she obeys not the rudder; the storm increases apace, we are lost!"

"Give me the helm dastard!" said Harold, as he thrust the coward from his post, and placed himself there; "what fear ye varlets," added he; "will your terror quell the wind? Bestir yourselves; recollect that Harold is with you and fear not." As he said this, the boat shipped a heavy sea and all were knee-deep in water.

"Bale! bale!" shouted the sailors, and all laboured to throw out the water which now half filled her.

"We are lost men" cried many voices; "Father of mercies save us!"

Digitized by Google

"Silence dogs!" cried Harold, his voice rising above the storm; "Be silent and work. By the cup of Odin I will cast the first that speaks into the sea." His fine form stood towering in the stern, firm on his feet, his body waving with violent tossing of the boat, his look calm, his eye keen as it steadily watched the course of the billows.

"We will make for the coast of France; cheer up comrades, we shall run before the gale and soon make the shore." As he spoke a gust came tearing past and blowing the sails into shreds; another sea rolled over them, the boat again filled, cries of despair arose, and a sturdy sailor, named Biorn, led the rising mutiny.

"It is folly to do anything—the brains of the giant Ymer are upon us—let us drink while we can."

"Down varlets into the bottom of the boat; we shall do yet" cried Harold sternly.

"Do!" said the sailor, "curses light upon me but we are done already; and curse thine heart sir earle, for bringing us here."

"Here Wulffe," said the earle, "hold the helm." The vassal obeyed, though trembling with terror; he feared both the storm and his lord. In an instant Harold sprung over the thwarts of the boat, seized Biorn by the waist, and cast him high in the air with a swing that sent him like a dog into the sea; a yell scarce audible in the storm, seeming like the feeble scream of the sea-gull, was heard, but the mountain of waters heaved past and the man was gone for ever. Harold was again at the helm.

"Obey or die! this is no time to trifle" cried he; "down all in the bottom of the boat; be obedient and I will save you." As he said this a terrible flash of lightning illumined the sea, an instant clap of thunder followed, death seemed at hand; for the sea, as if resolved to have its prey, swelled in dark relief against the sky, and as the thunder rolled growling away, a fiercer gust seemed to pursue its retreat: suddenly a crash was heard, and down came the masts athwart the gunwale.

"Cut all away" cried Harold; "fear not comrades; cut all away." Axes, swords, knives, the seax, all were in a moment at work; the wreck was cleared, the boat righted.

Digitized by Google

"Oars, oars!" cried Harold, and the sweeps were protruded, the strong Saxons bending to the stroke with a will, for life seemed flickering on their oars. For awhile the bark weathered the battle between the gale and the furious billows; but snap, snap, went the sweeps, and even Harold almost despaired. The French coast was now close, the breakers were heard, when the son of Godwin bethought him of a means by which they might be saved, though to do so seemed to all but his daring mind a hopeless endeavour.

"We have still one chance, and that will preserve us," he said; "get together the pieces of oars, the broken masts, tear up the thwarts, and lash them securely together with sheets, halliards, and spare rope in the boat; courage, Saxons, courage! Odin befriends the brave: cheer up, cheer up, we are not for Asgaard yet; we are doomed for battle, not for the waves." The rafts were made.

"Here Wulffe, hand me the cablet, fix it to the raft; now brave ceorles, all hands together and hoist it over her stern; there it goes—hurrah! and the now animated sailors joined in their shout of rising hope,—

"Make it fast—round she goes with the sea."

The vessel lay more tranquil; and again fresh-cherished hopes arose; she drifted towards the lee shore, the storm whistling past them, the liquid mountains rolling high and terribly around; but the boat was now beginning to fill with the many heavy seas which had broken over it.

"Bale!" cried Harold, with an encouraging voice; "bale, my brave Saxons, bale! the storm has ever been the Saxons' friend, not their enemy: dogs and Normans drown, Saxons die in battle; we shall yet drink the '*Waeshael*' at the festive board, and bale out mead and curnis instead of salt water; courage children of the sea, our glory is in the storm."

Thus they continued drifting for some hours, but greatly protected by the expedient to which Harold had resorted, which seemed to give their keel an unaccountable steadiness amidst the elements, whose strife appeared now inclined to abate.

"The storm lightens," said Wulffe; "it clears in the wind's eye."

Digitized by Google

"I told you not to fear," said Harold, "the blood of the sea-kings is in my veins, a keel was the throne of my ancestors, and the billows seem to be my subjects: let us sing the song of the Storm."

The waves now abated; the sea still rolled heavily, but the danger of foundering was past; the perils of an unknown coast, towards which they were drifting, still remained.

Suddenly Harold exclaimed, "I see a boat making towards us." In about half an hour the stranger came alongside; it was a small Norman pilot-boat, the master of which, as the weather cleared, had discerned their distress and run out to assist them. The Normans leaped on board the keel of Harold.

"Thanks brave Norman, you come in good time to assist us; we are poor Saxons, driven from the English coast by the storm."

"Worthy Saxon" said the pilot, "you are now safe; yonder lies the mouth of the river Somme; I have brought you oars, ply your sturdy arms, follow my little boat and you will soon be in safety." Saying this, he looked at Harold with a steady eye.

"Knowest thou me!" cried the latter, "that thou regardest me with such a steady look?"

"No!" replied the pilot, "but thou dost seem chief of these men, and I thought as I know many Saxon coasters, that we might have met before; but I cannot recollect thy lineaments."

"I have long," said Harold, "carried on a small traffic between the coast of Normandy and that of Sussex, but I am pretty well ruined by this storm; we have thrown our goods overboard, save only our dogs and our hawks, on which we set high value. Shall we be safe from plunder if we land on your coast?"

"Safe! safe!" cried the pilot; "the count of Ponthieu is a good man, and the *Lagan* among us is rarely exercised. You are too miserable to be worth pillaging; we only care for rich booty," cried he laughing. There was something sinister in his look that Harold did not like; it seemed to him of too piratical a nature to claim any confidence; but

Digitized by Google

the earldorman had no choice, for though the storm had abated, the gale was still too heavy to make head against, and his people were almost exhausted. The pilot returned to his boat, and, giving them some spare oars, made sail for the mouth of the Somme, the boat of Harold rowing heavily after. In a short time the pilot entered the harbour.

"I like not that caitiff" said Harold, "the villain's face has traitor written in every line of it; but we have no remedy, and must trust to the generosity of the count of Ponthieu. Be careful, and let no man know who I am, or the difficulties and dangers of our situation will be greatly increased—but hold! what have we here?"

"Two war-boats issuing from the port!" cried Wulffe.

"Just as I expected" said the earl; "now fate and our courage befriend us! for we can make no resistance against these Norman caitiffs." The armed boats bore down upon the Saxon chief, and were quickly alongside.

"Earl Harold!" cried the commander, "you are prisoner to my lord and master, Guion count of Ponthieu."

"Be it so sir knight," said Harold, "for we have no force to resist insult, and we expect generous and knightly treatment from the count. But how know ye that I am Harold?"

"The pilot," continued the commander of the armed boats, "knew you well, and gave information to the count, who instantly sent us forth to arrest you."

The boat of Harold was thus escorted into the harbour of St. Valery, where all three cast anchor. Harold was ordered to disembark amidst the surrounding multitude, who had crowded to the shore to see him, and was met by the count of Ponthieu at the head of a body of horsemen.

"Earl Harold you are my prisoner—nor shall you quit the castle of Abbeville till King Edward and his Saxons pay great ransom for their favourite."

"Count Guion," retorted Harold fiercely, "the body of Harold is in thy power, but his courage cowers not under the outrage of a recreant knight like thyself; greater is Harold in a dungeon than the false Guion on a throne!"

"Bear him hence!" furiously exclaimed the Count Guion to his guards; "bear him and his band of half-drowned

Digitized by Google

caitiffs to the dungeon of the castle: take even his hawk from him!"

"Coward!" said Harold, "insult me as thou wilt; little cares the wrist that is shackled for the honour of the hawk; but place a sword in my hand, and thou durst not touch the hawk of Harold for thy life!"

"Take his hawk knaves!" said the count, "roast it, and let him have nought else to eat till he has devoured his own bird."

Harold smiled at the insult; his countenance expressed ineffable contempt. A murmur of dissatisfaction ran through the crowd, and then Guion, ashamed of the scene which was so disgraceful to himself, ordered Harold and his people to be borne away to the castle.

One of Harold's followers had however escaped; formerly a smuggler, he had connections in this port who immediately recognized him. Taking advantage of the moment, he slipped among the crowd, was concealed by his friends, and immediately returned to England in the Saxon keel, which had been sold by auction for the benefit of the captors on the day of its arrival, and immediately fitted out by the smugglers of Abbeville. This man, named Canute, was a faithful follower of Harold in all his wars; strong in body, shrewd in mind, self-possessed in the hour of danger, he seldom lost a favourable opportunity of doing the best, and his whole mind was now bent upon succouring his imprisoned master. He well knew that there would be two great difficulties opposed to the liberation of the Saxon chief. The first was the enormous ransom which the earl of Ponthieu would unquestionably demand for a prisoner of such high rank, and one to whom public opinion pointed as the future king of England; the second was, the host of powerful enemies who were sworn to the destruction of Harold, and who would spring up like mushrooms when they heard of that warrior's misfortunes. Canute also greatly feared the Norman duke, who might take advantage of the present accident to destroy his rival; there was therefore no time to be lost, and he pressed the repairs of the Saxon boat so forward, that he sailed for the British coast on the night following the capture, and arrived safely at Pevensey, in

Digitized by Google

Sussex, the following day. There disposing of his Norman crew among his friends, with arrangements for shipping a cargo of smuggled goods, he instantly departed for Bodiam Castle, to inform the Childe of Sussex and the Lady Editha of the mishap which had befallen the earl.

"What tidings, good Canute?" said Alfnoth, who met this messenger of misfortune near the castle.

"The news I bear will little please ye sir Childe."

"How so ceorl?" answered the ealdorman. The vassal then described the misfortunes which had befallen his lord.

"Beshrew me!" quoth Alfnoth, "but this count of Ponthieu is a false loon, recreant to God and false to all the rules of chivalry—by the rood, this is but a sorry affair, and 'twill be no easy matter to relieve thy master, for there are traitors in England who bear him great spite, and will more thwart us in this business than even the caitiff of Ponthieu himself. Neither should I be surprised if that arch-traitor his brother Tostig, and William of Normandy, were to lay their heads together and take his life." Saying this, they returned to the castle, and passing the drawbridge entered the courtyard, where they met the Lady Editha, who from the battlements had recognized Canute at a distance, and descended to meet them in joyful expectation of some kind message from Harold.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XX.

Shows Editha in saddest dumps,
While her father stirs his stumps,—
Stirs them well, but all for nought,
He cannot jump into his boat.

How vain are the hopes of mortals! In wars, in perils of all kinds, Editha's lover had passed through dangers unscathed; yet in one hour of pleasure and apparent security, misfortune had come like a thunderbolt, and the greatest man of England was transferred by fate from high power to the dismal walls of a dungeon! The unhappy Editha scarcely heard the details of Harold's misfortunes; he was in the hands of the count of Ponthieu, and that fact was enough. It fell upon her sinking heart like ice; her look was calm, her features moved not, but her face seemed a piece of marble; her eyes were fixed, yet vacant; outward objects disappeared; and had danger surrounded her she would not have been sensible of its presence. But though terror made her pallid and stiffened her limbs, her mind was too powerful for fear, and instantly turned on the thought of how to save Harold.

"Editha! my dear Editha, speak to me!" said Alfnoth, with paternal anxiety. Editha answered not. He threw his arms round her, exclaiming, "Good God! I have hurt thee, my child, with this sudden news; run for her women, Canute! run, varlet, run!"

"No, no, my father!" said Editha, recalled to herself by his terror; "we want no women now; 'tis true I feel this terrible blow, but I am well; my thoughts are how to assist him. Think, think, father! there must be means,—I have no hopes from the king, he is surrounded by our enemies; the Norman duke, too, is not a generous foe; when his interest is concerned, he is implacable and cruel. O merciful Virgin, assist us! How! oh, how shall we free

Digitized by Google

him? Good Canute, you are shrewd and resolute, can we not get him from the prison?"

"Lady mine," said the brave Saxon, "this life is devoted to thy lord, but the sacrifice of my life cannot save him. I will risk it, but it must be risked with hope, or he loses a follower and will be worse off than before, for the failure of an attempt to relieve him will make the enemy more watchful."

"But can you advise nothing?" said Editha.

"Not yet lady," replied Canute; "the thing has happened so quickly that I have had no time to think."

"Editha have you the courage of your race, or are you a poor puling female?" asked her father.

"The purest Saxon blood is mine" replied the maiden, "and what her father desires Editha will do, even were it to refuse the hand of Harold—what danger can appal if encountered to save him? Father, tell me what you wish, and tell me quickly?"

"This—I will go to Abbeville with some brave retainers disguised as smugglers; we will try to liberate Harold; courage and caution can do much on these occasions, and I will dare this danger for the earl's safety and for the honour of the Saxons. He risked danger for me, and the blood of Alfnoth shall not be degraded by leaving his friend in peril rather than venture life. I know your love for me, and I would not willingly put your courage to a trial it could not bear; but I love to prove your lineage or I would not tell you of my enterprise. Now girl we will go this night; be courageous; take charge of the castle; my people are brave and faithful; trust old Colgrin and Elstan, and consult them in danger."

"My dear father," answered Editha, "I will act as becomes one of your race, and a Saxon maiden. The daughter of Alfnoth and the betrothed of Harold thinks only of their glory. The God of mercies and of men protects us in the castle of Bodiam, and in the dungeon of Abbeville. Go my father! go then, and in the name of Jesus the Saviour rescue the hero of the Saxon race;—the prayers, the very soul of your daughter will be with you! Would that you would but permit me to accompany you! Yes

Digitized by Google

dear father, let me go! I would be your page, disguised as a lad."

"Out upon you my child—a pretty page truly in such an enterprise as this! No, no; be satisfied my brave girl with being installed castellan, and in these times the post is one of no small danger."

That night Alfnoth left the castle on his dangerous and generous enterprise; with him went the shrewd Canute and twenty resolute followers, all armed, but in the guise of smugglers. They proceeded to Abbeville in company with the boat in which Canute had returned, the Frenchmen believing them to be employed in like pursuits with themselves and their friends.

On reaching the French coast, the signal being answered by Canute's friends, they landed and were concealed; but after a few days, the number of the Saxons led to some suspicion, for all knew the important prisoner's high value, and a traitor informed Guion of his apprehensions, who took measures accordingly. Alfnoth was soon warned of an unusual stir in the castle among the men-at-arms, and his French friends grew frightened. Canute saw the peril, and night had scarcely set in when the Saxons hastened to their boat, meaning to lie off at a small distance along the coast, and endeavour secretly to communicate with Harold through one of the guards, whom they had corrupted, and a friend in the town who was admitted into the secret of their designs. The plan had been rapidly and well laid. As they approached the quay an armed man met them in a narrow outlet of the town.

"Whither so fast my masters?" asked he, as he placed himself across their way.

"We are going to fish," answered the Frenchman, who was engaged in the smuggling affair.

"To fish! what, armed with long knives to catch fish! Where is your fishing gear? No, no, friends; I at least am no gudgeon to be caught after this fashion; what have you under your clothes my friend," continued he, taking hold of Alfnoth rudely by the cloak.

"That" said the Childe, furious at the insult, and with a blow he laid the Frenchman sprawling on the ground. The

Digitized by Google

man called aloud, and instantly the party were surrounded by the count's men-at-arms.

"Surrender ye caitiffs, or ye die!" said their leader.

"For the boat! for the boat!" cried Canute; "cut through them to the boat."

Out flew the far-famed terrible seaxes of the Anglo-Saxons.

The numbers were unequal, but Alfnoth and his followers fought as desperate men who had no alternative but to reach the boat, and they were also picked men; wherefore the French soon gave ground. The Childe kept in the rear as his men rushed to the boat; his courage would not allow him to fly, and the Frenchmen pressed hard. Most of his men had reached the boat, which now floated, but Canute fought by the side of his lord, who struck desperately with his seax. His foes were in armour, his body was exposed, so was Canute's, yet both retreated, fighting, middle-deep into the water.

"Now, now, spring in together!" shouted Canute.

"You first Canute," said the bold Saxon chief, as he made a step forward, and a sweeping cut at his close-pressing enemies, to cover the retreat of his follower.

"Both at once sir Childe," cried Canute, as obedient to his orders he sprung into the keel.

"Push off, push off!" cried the Childe, turning to leap also.

Obedient to his words, the long, and already protruded oars pushed the boat suddenly away, just as the chief made a spring, and as his feet were on a slippery rock he fell against the side of the boat, which at the same moment shot into the deep, and the Childe was plunged into the water. In an instant a host were upon him. Canute leaped desperately into the sea.

"To the rescue Saxons, to the rescue!" shouted the brave ceorl, and his gallant companions all followed; but the Frenchmen had enough, they would not abide the assault, and having made the leader prisoner, hurried him out of the water, drawing up on the beach, to which additional forces had now poured down. The Saxons, with loss and difficulty, again got into their boat and pulled off amidst a flight of arrows.

Digitized by Google

The anxiety evinced by the party to save the prisoner, convinced his captors of his importance, and he quickly found himself in presence of the count of Ponthieu.

"Who art thou varlet?" said the count, addressing his captive sternly.

"A knight of Earl Harold's" said Alfnoth; "a vassal more true to his lord than thou, base count, art to honour." The frank and fearless manner of Alfnoth abashed the recreant, and for a moment he quailed under the stern look of his prisoner.

"Then go to thy lord, sir insolence, and trust me ye shall both find all the comforts this castle can afford ye. By the mass," continued he, recovering his self-possession, "but your eyes shall be shaded from sunshine, and if appetite be the best sauce, I promise you enjoyment of your dinner. Take him hence and chain him with the other Saxon till I have time to talk about his own ransom; and hark ye, sir knight, tell your chief as you clank your fetters together, that Guion of Ponthieu will have great ransom from Edward for his brother-in-law."

Alfnoth laughed aloud.

"At what laughest thou?" said the count.

"Why," answered the Childe, "I think, sir count, you reckon without your host. Know ye not that Edward fears Harold, and loves him not. The queen is no favourite, the enemies of Harold rule at court, and you will get no ransom but from the family of the earl—and they are poor; for he has more debts than revenues, spending generously beyond his means."

"Umph! say you so?" said the count. "Well, we shall see; in the mean time lay thy carcass alongside of thy master's in the dungeon. Away with him!" Alfnoth was borne off.

The Saxon followers seeing all hopes of saving their leader were vain, and fearing that armed boats would quickly be upon them, pulled off, and hoisting sail, reached the coast of Sussex without further difficulties.

On their arrival Canute proceeded to Bodiam where, as may well be supposed, all was thrown into dire confusion by the afflicting intelligence.

Digitized by Google

On this occasion Editha exhibited that courage which so often is seen to blaze forth in the gentlest female characters when stimulated by affection. Instead of a weak and unavailing grief, she resolved to imitate the example of her father, and endeavour to obtain both his freedom and that of Harold; but ere taking any decided steps, resolved to give the matter her fullest consideration.

Editha's mind was not affected by the prejudices of her rank, which generally make the dames of high degree live in ignorance of human nature. They mix with nothing below them, and forget that those whose rank is inferior are generally superior in intellect. The latter rub against the world, and their wits are kept bright and healthy, while the others grow sickly and feeble. Not so Editha: she mixed with the poorer Saxons, encouraged their freedom, and trusted to her abilities, more than to her station, for maintaining her superiority. She had every confidence in the extreme shrewdness of Canute and his local knowledge; she also well knew the resolution of Elstan the huntsman; both these men were old soldiers, men who were hardy, bold, faithful, and accustomed to act upon the moment. After a night spent in reflection she called them to her.

"Canute, my father has failed to release Harold, and is himself a prisoner. Our hopes have now devolved upon me, my energy must be exerted in proportion to their danger, and it shall be so; for know, my friends, that the Lady Editha is worthy of her Saxon blood—that blood is thick: she fears no danger in such a cause. Now get ye hence, commune with each other, and let me know what ye propose to save Earl Harold and the Childe of Sussex. If ye can do so by some sudden attempt, well; if ye fail, then will I seek at the court of Edward, and at the hands of the Saxons, those means of force that shall free or avenge your chiefs on the cowardly Count Guion of Ponthieu."

"Lady," said Canute, "we have sworn fealty to the lords now prisoners, our lives are devoted to their service. We have parleyed much upon the sad events which have befallen them, and we need no reflection beyond that which we have already bestowed. Our opinion is this—that you should consult the Vala, whose wisdom is great, and that we should

Digitized by Google

hold our lives at naught to do her bidding. But you lady command, and we, your vassals, will do your bidding." Saying this, the two men kneeled down and kissed the fair hand held out to them.

"My friends, Editha has no thought but to save those without whom her life is useless and odious. Ye are both Christians, we will do nought but what to Christians is permitted. I am distrustful of the Vala's incantations, but still she is a woman of much forecast, and accustomed to weigh probabilities; her means too are very great; she can learn things which we know not of, and I believe, before God and our Saviour, it is permitted to a daughter to seek all means of saving the life of her father. To the Vala's tower then, in God's name, let us go with to-morrow's dawn." Saying this, Editha retired to her chamber in the western tower of the castle. She had scarcely kneeled to pray before a crucifix when the loud barking of dogs alarmed her, for her nerves were on the stretch from the rude assaults they had so lately received. She instantly rose and went to the casement, from whence she beheld Vafthrudner and Gangrader, the huge canine companions of the sorceress, growling and barking at the drawbridge.

She ordered Colgrin to admit the faithful animals, who came straight to her, and lying down at her feet licked her shoes. A billet was fixed to the collar of Vafthrudner, which, with some fear of the animal, she put her hand forth to take off; but he offered his neck meekly, and both dogs fixed their eyes steadily upon her, pointing their inquiring ears as she opened the billet, and read as follows:—

"Be cunning as foxes, and swift as the horse,
Have the boldness of lions at will,
Or the Saxon chiefs now detained by force,
Must die in the caves of Abbeville.
A man may resist, but a woman by wiles,
Entangles her foes and wins by her guiles;
Then, reckless of danger, send over the wave,
And hasten thy father and Harold to save."

Editha felt her blood creep slowly through her veins as she read these lines. She shuddered at the great responsibility that in one fearful hour had fallen upon her—the

Digitized by Google

fate of the two men who possessed all her affections, and upon whom she hung for protection against the vicissitudes of mortal life, now depended upon her feeble efforts. Barred dungeons and strong castles held them in durance; avarice, envy, self-interest, animated the powerful chiefs on whose will the lives of her father and Harold depended. Against all these cruel enemies how could a weak woman prevail? She sunk upon a chair and burst into tears. The two dogs seemed to understand her grief, and without taking their eyes from her face, on which, as I have before said, they were steadfastly fixed, they crouched down at her feet, which they licked as if to comfort and encourage her. She heeded them not, until with a plaintive whine each placed a huge paw upon her knees. The strange action of these creatures drew her attention to their generous sympathy; they knew not what ailed her, but saw that she was in distress—and the kindness of the dog towards man is well known.

"Noble animals!" exclaimed she, laying her fair hands upon their broad foreheads; "yes! I will receive the comfort you offer to me; ye are but the means through which a mighty power offers me consolation. I accept the signal as a promise vouchsafed by Him in whose hands are our destinies." She bowed her head over the dogs, who had now placed their large jowls on her knees, still attentive to her looks, and ejaculated a prayer. After which she rose from her seat full of confidence, wrote on a slip of parchment, "Come Vala, you are wise—aid me. I have courage." She fastened the slip to Vafthrudner's collar, and patting the two dogs on their foreheads, threw up her hands, crying, "Out, away!" and with a joyful yelp they flew from her.

Here we will leave her to tell what passed at the court of Normandy after William's return there from Bodiam Castle to Rouen.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXI.

William of Rouen meets his wife;
Geoffrey Martel commences strife,
But, being thumped, away does ride,
Leaving William to keep the bride.

When the duke got home, he soon brought the treaty of marriage with Matilda to a conclusion; and the count of Flanders sent his daughter under an escort to meet her intended husband at the castle of Arques. William issued from thence with a brilliant retinue to meet her on the confines of his dukedom, and they were closing together in greeting when the duke, always alert and observant, suddenly exclaimed,—

"What alarms those sheep? It is not us, for they fly this way. It is not the Princess Matilda's retinue, either. All is not right methinks."

"By the mass! sir duke, I hold to your opinion, for there is armour shining in yon wood," replied Aimard d'Aumale.

"Ay," added Amauri de Flammancour, "and plenty of them! By all the saints, but this is strange!"

At this instant Sir Baudric—formerly in the service of the count of Anjou, and who had, as the reader will recollect, entered the service of William—rode up to the duke and his two companions, exclaiming, "Take your lances sirs in haste; I see the villain Pecquigny. Those men-at-arms belong to the count of Anjou, and will set upon us presently. We shall have hot work, for Geoffrey Martel never attacks with inferior numbers."

"So much the better," answered the duke; then, turning round, exclaimed in a loud voice, "Knights, squires, and men-at-arms—chivalry of Normandy! there comes the count of Anjou and his base wolves; see how the sheep fly before them! I suppose the varlets take us also for legs of mutton! They come on bravely with their carving-knives,

Digitized by Google

by the splendour of God! they shall anon find such caper sauce to their feast as mayhap to spoil their cookery! Couch your lances sirs; the princess of Flanders sees our prowess, and in her danger trusts to the swords of Normandy."

By this time the band of Anjou, which far outnumbered that of the duke of Normandy, came rushing on.

"Forward sirs!" shouted the duke; "let's meet these galliards half-way in their charge, and save their wind; they'll want it all anon. Dex aie! to the rescue, ho!" The rowels were plunged into the panting flanks of the fiery steeds, and the earth shook under the charging chivalry. Strong was the shock and clash of encountering knights, and the contest fierce; for the followers of the count were resolute and numerous, and those of Duke William the flower of Norman knighthood, and animated by the danger of Matilda.

The retinue of this princess, with great prudence, formed a line between the combatants and their mistress; for William had despatched a knight to forbid their joining in the conflict, ordering them to remain as a reserve, covering the progress of the princess's carriage and female retinue, who were to proceed rapidly towards Arques.

The contest hung doubtful; the count of Anjou slew the chevalier Amauri de Flammancour with his lance; and then Aimard d'Aumale, coming up to his assistance, was from behind pierced through the back of the neck by Sir Pecquigny. D'Aumale fell dead. William at a short distance thus saw his two dearest friends go down. This roused him to fury; he put forth his matchless strength, he overthrew all who opposed him, being followed by his standard-bearer, and well supported by the intrepid Taillefer. The sudden impetus thus given to the fight, and the advance of the standard, struck terror into the followers of Anjou, and Martel himself, seeing the Norman chief press towards him, raging like a wild bull, dreaded the encounter.

"Pecquigny" said he, "the day is lost! we must save ourselves."

"*Sauve qui peut!*" re-echoed Pecquigny, as ready to save himself as his master. They turned their horses and

Digitized by Google

fled, being for a moment protected by their still fighting companions. But the dastardly cry quickly became general, and the retinue of the princess, seeing that the victory was in favour of their new master, now came up fresh and joined in the slaughter of the fugitives.

"Again I am the prize of the best knight in Europe" exclaimed Matilda, as she stepped lightly from her carriage to embrace her husband, who had ridden up to the litter, and leaped from his horse to meet her.

"Are you wounded?" exclaimed she, checking herself for an instant.

"No" replied the victor; and the princess threw herself into his arms—"but," continued the duke, "Aumale, Beaumesnil, and Flammancour, with many others, are slain."

At this moment the hardy Taillefer rode up hastily to William.

"My liege, the knights and men-at-arms are making prisoners; what is your pleasure?"

"Make no prisoners!" quoth William, sternly, "there is no knighthood in this base attempt; but if my people catch the count of Anjou, bring him alive to me, that I may tie him by the feet to the axle of that carriage, and drag him through the streets of Arques till he dies. Put the prisoners to the sword and follow the litter."

"Oh, spare them—spare them my liege!" cried the gentle Matilda, greatly terrified.

"Why fair princess?—they would have destroyed us both," answered William. "If the count of Anjou and his people conduct themselves like robbers, like robbers they must be treated."

"Alas! alas! it is just," said Matilda; "but spare their lives, and punish them with imprisonment."

"Be it as you will, I can refuse you nothing." Turning towards Taillefer, William said:

"Spare those you now make prisoners, as the Lady Matilda so wills it." But unobservedly he made a sign to his intelligent champion, which was well understood between them. The duke and Matilda now seated themselves in the litter, and proceeded towards Arques. Meanwhile Taillefer, riding off, hanged the caitiffs already made prisoners in

Digitized by Google

the wood; and then followed William to Arques, where the marriage solemnities were performed with a splendour suitable to the power and grandeur of the contracting parties.

Here we must again accuse good old Sir William Mallet and his boy Wace of an anachronism; for certainly the duke of Normandy's marriage took place in 1055, nine years before Harold was made prisoner, and the war with Anjou was antecedent to that event. But probably the venerable Mallet, who was evidently of a poetic temperament, grouped his events with more regard to picturesque and interesting effect than to strict accuracy; and the boy Wace, who was entirely poetic, readily acquiesced.

CHAPTER XXII.

Now chivalry resigns the lance,
Ladies and knights together dance,
But in the hall a voice is heard,
Which makes Duke William stroke his beard,
Albeit he little had to stroke,
Yet did the trick like older folk.
It answered well, for in a trice
He changed his mind, on good advice.

About the time of William's marriage, continued the venerable knight of the Mallet, there came from various quarters certain rhymers, or jugglers, who were, and are to this day, accustomed to attend feasts and public rejoicings. They were then a miserable crew, and indeed are not better now, as thou well knowest Robert Wace, who art thyself a rhymer of great promise;—the knight smiled sarcastically. But those itinerant poets, or troubadours, as they were called, were then, and are now, employed in all love, and in all political intrigues. At the castle of Lillebonne we were in high festivity, when a party of jugglers came to the drawbridge with a small waggon holding their instruments and dresses—for they acted pantomimes. They demanded admittance, and were joyfully received. Their party were

Digitized by Google

three men, a boy and two women. The oldest man appeared to rule, and spoke various languages; the younger minstrel spoke Italian. It was late in the evening, but the duke ordered them to be introduced into the great hall, where the younger part of the company were engaged in dancing. Their entrance attracted general attention; they approached the duke, and made their obeisance.

"Of what nation be ye?" said William.

"We scarce know great duke," replied the eldest, in the Norman dialect, "for our lives have been spent in travelling through various countries, and we are natives of different climes." The speaker was a tall man, his look was severe, and fixed the attention. His complexion, and that of his male companions, was of the deepest copper-colour, their hair jet black. Their whole deportment was Eastern. On their heads were turbans, and they wore short embroidered loose jackets of a red colour, under which was a tunic reaching below the knee, and under the tunic very full trousers down to the ancle. The dress of the two women was that of Germany, mixed with Eastern costume. They were fair good-humoured-looking women, much freckled, and though pretty, without any extravagant pretensions to personal attractions.

"Whence come ye last?" said the duke.

"From Spain and Africa sire," answered the speaker before alluded to.

"Let's have a sample of thy minstrelsy," rejoined William, "for we would fain be merry."

The minstrels conversed together for a few minutes, and then the youth sung some Norman and Spanish airs.

His figure was slight and graceful, his features beautiful, his dark and delicate moustachios were set off by the rich clear brown of his complexion, and altogether he had a Moorish appearance.

The damsels of the court gathered round him in admiration, as the rich and powerful tones of his voice, which he accompanied with a Spanish guitar, filled the hall.

The eyes of the beautiful Matilda were fixed upon the lad with such intense interest, that had the youthful and gigantic William less confidence in his own manly beauty; in short,

Digitized by Google

had he been an ordinary man, he might have felt some jealousy at the pleasure with which his lovely consort regarded and listened to the minstrel stripling. Having sung a tender and romantic ditty in the Spanish language, he suddenly turned to a lively air, with such effect that the younger part of the company joined in chorus; when he ceased his song exclamations of regret were heard throughout the hall.

"How admirably he sings!" exclaimed Matilda. "I never was so enchanted by music before."

"Truly the stripling has much taste; I know but one person that can exceed him, and that is a woman," whispered the duke, and he looked at Matilda, who blushed deeply.

"Verily, my liege," observed one of the courtiers, "the Princess Matilda surpasses this youth; and allowing for the difference between the male and female voice, he alone seems capable of accompanying her grace."

As he thus spoke, the strong tones of the elder minstrel arose, echoing along the arched roof of the vaulted hall, and a thrill ran through the company as in a kind of wild chant he sung the song of Lodbrog. Another and another Scandinavian air followed, accompanied with frantic gestures, as he chanted, in rude poetry, the deeds of Rollo and his chiefs; then suddenly making a pause, he held out his hands towards the duke and Matilda, who were seated on a throne, and in uncouth extemporary rhymes sung the descent of William. Again he paused, fixing the breathless attention of the courtiers by his extraordinary gesticulation and voice. The minstrel seemed to be a supernatural being. For some moments he stood motionless, with his hands extended, and not a sound was heard in that vast hall. Again his voice arose, but the tone was changed; he spoke of future events in a solemn and commanding manner, and his expressions were dark and ambiguous. The duchess seemed alarmed. The duke's eyes were fixed upon the seer with intense interest, as the latter shadowed out his forecast of events. None but the Norman duke could then comprehend the dim prognostics of his meaning; but the deep projects of William's secret thoughts, so strongly occupied his own imagination that to him the speaker's words were words of fire, that set

Digitized by Google

his ambition in a blaze. To him they were prophetic, they foretold his destinies. The minstrel concluded with the Scandinavian war-song chanted by Harold on a former occasion :—

> Now welcome war,
> Whose terrors are
> The Norman's promised heaven !
> Let skulls abound,
> And mead flow round
> The warriors of the Raven !

When the minstrel concluded his prophetic declamation and song, in which all his company joined chorus, a general silence prevailed throughout the hall; all eyes were steadfastly fixed with a superstitious awe upon the singer, and Duke William seemed absorbed.

Suddenly the juggler covered his face with his hands.

"Coming events thicken upon the mirror of my mind," said he, in a deep smothered voice; then suddenly raising his head and looking full upon the Norman duke while he pointed with his outstretched arm and finger to the distant door of that large hall.

"Fate enters, and the Norman destinies will be fulfilled; step by step they approach. Mark!" added he, emphatically, as he turned his eyes in the direction of the porch, which was filled with menials who had congregated to see the dancing—"mark!" repeated he, and stamped his foot violently. The whole company started at his loud voice and manner, and all eyes were instantly fixed upon the entrance.

Matilda grew pale. The Norman hero, accustomed to sudden conspiracies, deliberately, but unobserved by the beholders, freed his sword from his ducal robes, and loosened it in the scabbard; some of his friends also entertained apprehensions, and prepared their minds for sudden resistance. In short, the nerves of the whole assembly were wound to the highest state of excitement, though none exactly knew why. A slight bustle now took place among the servants in the doorway, when an armed man hastily entered, his looks betraying important news.

"Even so," said the juggler, who had hitherto remained

Digitized by Google

motionless in the same position, and pointing to the door. But he now folded his arms, and bending his looks upon William, attentively observed the changes of the duke's countenance as the messenger approached, and kneeling at his feet said in a low voice—

"I have that for your liege's ear which it behoves me not to speak aloud."

"My friends will retire a few paces," said the duke, and laying his arm upon Matilda, added, "sit thee still fair consort;" then bending forward to the messenger, added, "drop thine intelligence into my ear."

"He holds no secret great duke," exclaimed the minstrel aloud; "thy destinies are as plain before me as thy majestic form, and that of thy lovely duchess. He bears to thee that Harold is in bonds—prisoner to Guyon count of Ponthieu!"

The duke started. "Harold a prisoner!" He regarded the minstrel with a look of astonishment and doubt. "What! Harold the Saxon?"

"Even so," said the still kneeling herald.

"Ay, even so!" said the troubadour, repeating the words of the herald; "and if he there dies never shall William of Normandy mount the throne of England. King! if king thou wilt be, read the stars; thy rival is given to thy power: destroy him and others will succeed; the race of Cerdric is not extinct in England: a rightful heir is more dangerous than a usurper. Let Harold be saved, and used as an instrument of thy glory!"

No sooner had he uttered these words in an earnest and warning voice, than he suddenly turned to his companions, and at a signal they began a morris-dance to the instrument of the young minstrel. The piece at once attracted the attention of the company, but during its execution it was evident that the elder minstrel cast furtive glances at the duke, who seemed to be absorbed in thought; at last however, as if awaking from a reverie, he observed—

"By the rood good minstrel! but thy fair dames foot it gaily to the music; I have rarely seen four better performers than they and their stout companions; but I would rather see two such strong fellows using their arms than their legs."

Digitized by Google

"They can use both," replied the juggler; "save and except your liege, I think no man in this hall could cope with them."

"'Twere no easy matter sir minstrel, I grant ye," rejoined William; "but yet I would not be the best of them in the hands of my good friend Sir William Mallet, here."

"Verily" said the minstrel, bowing to me, "I marked not the frame of this noble knight when I uttered those rash words; the blood of the Scandinavian giants degenerates not; but we are weary my liege, permit us to retire." This was granted, and the minstrels quitted the chamber, which was now filled with groups conjecturing as to the fate of Harold, and how he could have become the prisoner of the count of Ponthieu; for it must be recollected that the circumstances of his capture, which we have before related, had all taken place within a few days, and at that period there was little communication between the subjects of the count and the duke, so that no intelligence of Harold's misfortunes had reached Lillebonne.

As the company broke up, William secretly ordered the minstrel to be brought before him next morning. At the time appointed the man entered the apartment. The duke fixed his eyes upon him for a few minutes, and then demanded who he was, and whence he came.

"Thou art not," quoth the duke, "one of those ordinary minstrels who prowl through Europe. Answer me frankly, or dread my displeasure."

"Thou art right, noble duke; I am not an ordinary minstrel, for I am also an astrologer. I have travelled in all countries; I am full of mystic lore, to which I add a great knowledge of mankind, and have an intuitive judgment of individual characters, which is perhaps more effectual than the mysteries of the black art; and this judgment tells me at once to speak plainly when I meet an extraordinary man like thyself! Thou hast no faith in necromancy, with thee I will be plain."

"It is for your advantage to be so," replied William, "for I am generous towards those that serve me, but vindictive to those who betray me. If thou hast real knowledge of the future, well canst thou tell the perils that awaits thee an thou crossest the path of William of Normandy. Look at

Digitized by Google

the employment of that woman," continued he, pointing out of the window. The juggler looked out and saw a woman skinning eels. "That" said William, laughing heartily, "would be an awkward situation for an astrologer; yet it is as easy to flay an astrologer as an eel! Now take the hint," added he fiercely, with a terrible look, "for by the splendour of God! that shall be thy fate if thou playest thy juggling tricks in Normandy. Serve me well then, and be this an earnest of my liberality:"—he offered a purse of money to the juggler.

"William of Normandy," said the astrologer, "I accept thy purse, if to refuse it would give thee offence; but I seek not riches—they are already in my possession. Wilt thou that I take thy purse loathingly, or serve thee unpaid, and with a free will?"

"Even as pleases thee best," said William, putting the purse again into his pocket. "If honour be thy desire, let this ring be a token of my regard;" saying this he took a golden ring from his finger, on which were engraved some Runic characters. "This ring is Scandinavian; let it be a signet of confidence between us."

The astrologer took the gift, and no sooner had his eyes fallen upon the characters, than his whole face expressed the greatest satisfaction.

"This ring," quoth he, "contains a charm: it is more valuable to me, O duke, than thy dukedom of Normandy. These characters form a sentence from the *Havamaal*, the sublime words of Odin himself—"*Be humane and gentle to those travelling on the mountain or on the sea!*" Such are the words of Odin! Will the descendant of Odin not hearken to the words of the god? Think of Harold!" Then putting the ring on his finger he muttered a few words, and said, "Duke William I will prove my gratitude; I can best show it by the intelligence I shall from time to time communicate for thy advantage. I have emissaries innumerable, and in all countries; it was through them I learned Harold's captivity."

"Then thou art certain that he is a prisoner."

"As sure as that I stand before thee; and thou must release him."

Digitized by Google

"Were it not better that he died in the dungeons of the count?"

"No! the count will take a ransom; mammon is his god; by bribes and by force united you should free the Saxon chief and his followers."

"To what purpose?" demanded William.

"To gain the hearts of the Saxons," replied the astrologer.

"What!" said William, "and set him free?"

"Yes," answered the astrologer, "his life will serve thee more than his death: he will seize the throne at the decease of Edward, and thou wilt have a rival surrounded by envious and treacherous chiefs, both secretly and openly denying his right to the crown. It is true that Edgar is a stripling; but he is of the blood of Cerdic, and will unite the nation against thy claims. It is thy interest to obtain possession of Harold's person; treat him generously, and swear him to fealty on the most sacred relics of the Catholic faith: let him then return to England thy betrothed vassal, and should he seize the throne, a perjured head will ill support a disputed crown. Little has the duke of Normandy to fear from such a rival! But I tell thee duke, that should Harold disappear in thy dungeons, and King Edward die, Edgar will have received the allegiance of the whole Saxon nation ere the news reach thee that the king is dead. By this Runic ring I speak the truth! Harold is in thy power: do even as thy wisdom dictates."

Saying this the astrologer crossed his hands on his bosom, and stood with downcast eyes, as if in thought. Duke William paced up and down the room, reflecting upon the words that he had heard.

After some time, during which neither spoke a word, William suddenly stopped and addressed the astrologer,

"What is thy name?"

"Ulric," said the minstrel.

"Ulric," continued the duke, "I reject not thy wise counsel: proceed to Abbeville, gain all the intelligence relative to Harold that thou canst, and if by thine art thou canst discover the means to free him, in case my application should fail even to do so. In one hour from hence I will give thee a letter to the count of Ponthieu, claiming Harold as

Digitized by Google

my guest, and demanding his freedom without ransom; but the present of a rich manor bordering on his own territory shall be given in acknowledgment of his courtesy. On the contrary, if he refuse my demand, I will take Harold from him by force, and ravage his country with fire and sword. Present this letter to the count of Ponthieu in secret. I wish that I may receive Harold at his hands as a free gift: tell him you are my confidential messenger, and that the secret of my demand shall never be divulged but by his own fault. Away then good Ulric, and be cautious on thy road, for the foragers of the count of Anjou infest that line of country.

"By the splendour of God!" continued he, greatly irritated, "I will make that caitiff bite the dust for the injuries which he has done to me; but the fruit is not yet ripe, I must act cautiously, for his power is great, and but for his ribald conduct might be equal to mine."

In an hour's time Ulric and his party were on the road to Abbeville.

"I greatly fear these ferocious bands of Angevins," said the youthful Lopez, for so the stripling was called by his companions.

"Truly it is dangerous," answered the astrologer. "I like it not; but there is no help."

"We are pledged to the enterprise," replied Lopez, "and the reward is worth a thousand dangers; but would it not be better for us to travel in the darkness of the night?"

"No" said Ulric. "Duke William has not yet freed this country from the lowest class of robbers, who at night would assassinate us; whereas, if we fall into the hands of an Angevin troop they will preserve our lives for the sake of our minstrelsy."

"At all events," cried Ivar, "it is not either four or six men that shall ill-treat our party."

"Ye three are stout men; and though I be slender, my courage is equal if not greater than yours," observed the youth.

"Poor Winifred and I," observed the good-humoured Rose, smiling, "would be in greater danger than any of you with the unprincipled count of Anjou and his libertine

Digitized by Google

associates: the beautiful countess sorely pressed us not to undertake this enterprise; but Winifred and I are not so easily frightened out of our purpose."

"Nevertheless, I think you might as well have stayed," whispered Ivar, looking tenderly at Rose.

"You be hanged! and I dare say you will be, if the laws are executed as they should be."

"Silence Rose!" said the more grave Winifred. "I like not such jests, you giddy woman; we are in danger, and let our thoughts be serious."

"Happen what may," remarked Lopez, "we are in God's hands."

"Ay and we have good wit and good courage," said Kenred, "and God helps those who help themselves."

They had not long continued in this jocund converse to cheer the way, when, at a turn of the road, they came upon a party of horsemen.

"Welcome minstrels!" said Pecquigny, for it was he, "welcome from the East! as I judge from your dress."

"Even so sir knight," said the minstrel; "I am an astrologer, passing to Abbeville."

"Ye shall not go so far to exercise your trade. I am Sir Pecquigny, the castellan of the lord of Anjou; and by the foot of the devil you shall give us fair sport at Beauvais, where the count of Anjou has borrowed a small castle for change of air. Such excursions do his health great service, and ye will much divert him."

"Sir," said the minstrel, "we are even bound for Abbeville, and on affairs which cannot be dispensed with; but, with your leave, after to-morrow we will attend your bidding."

"Ha, ha, ha! '*after to-morrow*' my friend, never suits Sir Pecquigny and his friends. We are mortal enemies to the future tense, except when we talk of repentance, or paying debts."

He then dismounted, and so did several others, and having rifled the pockets of the party without ceremony, remounted, disposing of the minstrels between them, except the two women, whom they put into a cart which they drove rudely along. It was soon evident that the younger minstrel was

Digitized by Google

incapable of the hurried pace and labour of the march; and the entreaties of the two women, that the handsome youth should be placed along with them in the waggon, gave rise to much insolent ribaldry from Pecquigny and his crew, who were however induced to consent. Thus they travelled till night, when they arrived at the château where the count of Anjou sojourned. The night was excessively obscure as they passed through the town of Beauvais, near which the castle was situated, and they stopped at a cabaret to drink, talking to the people of the house and other curious bystanders who had collected to see the party. With these the prisoners also entered into conversation, and when the party again moved the elder minstrel had disappeared. The late hour and darkness of the night prevented any search being made, and they proceeded to the castle, but there Pecquigny found an order for him and his party to proceed to the count at Château Gontier. Geoffrey wanted Pecquigny to join him with his gens d'armes as quickly as possible; but he had now a few moments' leisure to examine the papers found on the persons of the minstrels, and he discovered the letter of the duke of Normandy to the count of Ponthieu.

"By the tail of the devil!" exclaimed he, "but these minstrels are emissaries of the duke of Normandy. Hubert, bring that stripling here, and for once in our lives the women must be treated respectfully; let none of our wild dogs near them, except with their own sweet pleasure, for methinks they will be of use to our good master; and if we wish to keep our skins on our bodies, we must not neglect his interests."

As this moment a great screaming was heard.

"By the mass!" replied Hubert, "if those chickens are to be kept for the count's table, there's no time to be lost, for the foxes seem already to have broken into the hen-house."

"Away then varlet!" said Pecquigny, "and lose no time."

In a few minutes Hubert returned with the young minstrel, who seemed to be in a state of great agitation.

Digitized by Google

"You have weak nerves young man," said Pecquigny to the youth.

"I may well be alarmed," retorted the latter, "at the insults offered to my companions. The women have been insulted sir knight; this is not becoming in armed men, and I would fain know by what right you hold us prisoners in this castle."

"By the hoof of the devil, my young cockerel, you talk bravely! but I'll take you down a peg before I've done with you. Besides, my followers have no intention to insult the two ladies—they needn't have squalled so devilishly! However, we shall let them alone at present—all in good time, so don't fret your little spirit upon that account; and instead of talking to me after this fashion, for which, half an hour ago, I would have chucked you over the battlements, tell me, I say, who are you, and whence come you?"

There was a keenness of look and a malignity of countenance in Pecquigny that proclaimed all the villainy of soul which he had displayed, when persuading the poor maiden of Brabant, whose father and mother were hanged in the wood, to escape with the young man into Italy. This look was habitual to him—it made the youthful minstrel's heart quail; but mustering all his courage and presence of mind he replied—

"Sir knight, I thought not to anger thee by my speech, and crave thy pardon. We are poor minstrels, who wander about from place to place; we last came from Lillebonne, and were on our way to Brabant, bearing with us a letter from the duke of Normandy to the count of Ponthieu, which you have taken from us, and which I now see lying by you."

"Then why did your elder companion fly?"

"I know not; we have not been long acquainted, and he had no time to communicate with me."

"I think I have seen his face before in Brabant," observed Pecquigny; "but I recollect not on what occasion."

The terror of the youth was here almost beyond concealment. He trembled.

Digitized by Google

"I have often heard Ulric mention Brabant as a place with which he was acquainted, and where I first met him."

"Ay," rejoined Pecquigny; "I was sure I had seen him before, but I cannot recollect where."

The young minstrel now became more reassured, and was able to withstand the keen glances of Pecquigny, whose eyes were fixed upon him, and seemed to search for features which had been forgotten. After a short silence, Pecquigny resumed the inquiry.

"How long has Earl Harold been prisoner?"

"I know not; Ulric and the duke of Normandy conversed in secret upon this matter."

"Then you know not the earl personally?"

"I have seen him."

"Where?"

"At the court of Brabant, where we played and sung before Earl Baldwin."

"If the count of Anjou will trust you with a message to the count of Ponthieu, to baffle the plans of the duke of Normandy, would you undertake the mission?—well I ween my master would willingly have the brave Saxon for his friend."

"I would willingly assist to free the Saxon earl," replied the youth, calmly; "but the attempt will be difficult and dangerous. With what guerdon will the count repay the danger that my companions and myself must encounter, if we betray our trust as emissaries of Duke William?"

"I know not," answered Pecquigny; "but the count of Anjou is powerful and generous, and the reward will be great."

"Then I will trust thy word and thy master's generosity," rejoined the youth; "let myself and my companions go, and we will make the attempt."

"Not so fast young fox!" said Pecquigny, laughing; "I don't catch birds for the pleasure of letting them fly again; I keep 'em to sing, or eat them. No, no, youngster! you shall trudge with me to Château Gontier, or Domfront;" on the road to which I shall leave the party, said Sir William Mallet, and return to Ulric.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIII.

Loudly William and Guion caroll'd,
Over the capture of Saxon Harold,
William political hate did nourish,
Guion of Ponthieu sought de monish,
But wit is always too much for pelf,
When iron chains must be broken by stealth.

WHEN Ulric escaped from Beauvais he proceeded straight to Abbeville, where he demanded an audience of the count of Ponthieu, to whom he narrated in his strange manner the events of the preceding days, and the demand of William that Harold should be given up to him.

"Thy story is doubtful" said the count, "but not impossible. William would willingly possess the person of Earl Harold, for no man knows better than the duke that dead dogs never bite. However, get thee hence varlet; hie thee to Duke William, and say that he shall not have Harold, either dead or alive, without great ransom. I must have higher ransom for him than I take it the avaricious duke will be inclined to give, for I never yet knew him let a byzant go out of his hand till he had turned it half a dozen times round—as loth to part with it as a mother is with her babe." The astrologer smiled at this observation, for he recollected the complacency with which the duke replaced the proffered purse in his pocket and substituted the ring.

"Most noble count," said the minstrel, "wouldst thou let me talk with Harold, so that I may learn what ransom he would offer to Duke William or yourself?"

"No varlet!" replied the count, fiercely; "sooner than let thee talk to Harold, I would hang thee from the battlements of Abbeville for a warning to all impertinent minstrels. Away I say, thou varlet!"

The minstrel quitted the apartment of the count, but as he passed through the court of the castle he saw a gendarme whom he had formerly known.

Digitized by Google

"Balder! knowest thou me not?"

"No" said the gendarme.

"Wast thou not wrecked once upon the coast of Brittany?"

"Yes," replied the armed man.

"Dost not recollect being borne senseless to a cave, and there recovered by a necromancer, who had saved thee from the waves?"

"Yes verily, I do; and knowest thou aught of that necromancer—for he not only saved me from the waves, but also from the wild Bretons; and willingly would I serve him, if such should be my hap. But how knowest thou that I was so saved?"

"By mine art; for I too am a necromancer. If thou wilt help me thou wilt help him who saved thee in the cave; for a kindness done unto one of the fraternity is acceptable to all. Besides Balder, thy blood is from the north; the Scandinavian red stream flows in the Norman veins."

"'Tis true," said Balder; "and I will willingly assist thee if thou hast need of my aid, save it be in aught against the interests of the count my master."

"What blood flows in the veins of the count?" asked the minstrel.

"He is a Frenchman."

"And does the Dane call the Frank his master?"

"I have sworn fealty to him," said Balder, colouring deeply as he answered the question.

"And why not swear fealty to thy liege lord, the duke of Normandy?"

"'Twas chance," rejoined Balder, "that threw me into the service of the count of Ponthieu."

"Then let chance take thee out of it friend—serve thy liege lord of Normandy. Owest thou a debt of gratitude to this count?"

"No! I owe him nothing but hatred, for yesterday he struck me because I spoke kindly to those Saxon prisoners." Here the minstrel spoke in the ear of the man-at-arms, who started.

"What! knowest thou that?" said he; "then, by heaven, thou wast in the cave! Yet we were alone!"

Digitized by Google

"Look well at my features—years make strange changes," said the astrologer.

"'Tis so—thou art the necromancer himself, Ulric!"

"Even so!—Now Balder, aid me to speak with Harold; I know thy life will thereby be in danger, but reward awaits the brave, and the blood of the North trembles not at danger!"

"I owe my life to thee, and will freely risk it for thee; to-morrow night I shall be sentinel over the donjon where the earl is confined; meet me if thou canst reach my post at midnight—but I know not how thou canst get there."

"Leave that to me" said the minstrel; "thou shalt know me by a small light seen in the field beyond the tower: if all be right, cough."

The next day the minstrel, in disguise, wandered about the town of Abbeville, and when night came he repaired to the outside of the tower, on the top of which Balder stood sentinel. The light was scarce shown when the cough of recognition was heard from above.

The tower was high, the night dark and tempestuous, but the minstrel had brought with him several wands of great length, these he tied together, and the last had a forked end; he untied a bundle, out of which he took a rope ladder and fixing one end on the end of the long wand, he pushed it up to a grated window; and the end of the ladder having iron hooks, caught in the bars. The bold minstrel mounted the ladder; and having reached the top, stood on the iron bars, and again hooking the ladder to his long wand enabled Balder to pull it up. The minstrel pulled hard to see if it had been firmly fixed above; all was safe if Balder was not a traitor to his promise. The height was now awful —for one moment the minstrel hesitated, but the next he again swung high in air, dangling amidst the storm, in a few moments more was on the top of the tower.

"We are lost" said Balder, "unless your courage be firm! The rounds who visit the sentinels have not yet passed, and it is a quarter of an hour beyond their time,—never did such an accident happen before. I fear we are discovered—it may be that the high wind has prevented the guard hearing the hour toll; however, you must hang on the ladder till the rounds are passed—quick, quick! I hear their tread along

Digitized by Google

the walls! Be bold, fear me not, I am true to you!" The minstrel's courage was great, and there was no choice; he descended a few steps of the ladder, so as to conceal himself below the parapet, and Balder cast his cloak over the hooks which fastened the ladder to the wall: and scarcely had he taken this precaution when the patrol arrived.

"Who goes there?" cried Balder.

"Friends," said the leader.

"Advance one of you and give the watchword;" the man advanced alone and the watchword was given in a whisper—it was "*Harold.*" The minstrel heard the word and thought himself discovered; he was about to descend quickly, when he heard Balder cry out loudly.

"All right—advance; watch and ward!"

"Why Balder where's your cloak this tempestuous night?" asked the warder.

"It's on the parapet; I fastened it there to dry in the wind, for it was wet, and I can keep myself warm by walking in my beat if you don't keep me standing long."

"Ay ay, comrade, we won't plague you; we want to get back to the guard-house before it rains again. All's right I suppose with the Saxon chiefs below in the clink?"

"O yes—all right."

"Well, good night!" And away the patrol marched to the great satisfaction of the minstrel and Balder. The former now came on to the tower.

"Follow me," said Balder in a whisper, as he descended a few covered steps which led to the dungeon, and taking a bunch of keys that hung on the wall with one of them unlocked the door; then both entered a dark passage, which led round the tower, to enable its defenders to shoot arrows through the loopholes pierced in its massive walls. Groping along this passage they came to a small door which Balder opened.

"Descend" said he, "this winding staircase leads into the dungeon; there is no other door." The minstrel entered. "I will leave you for an hour," said the sentinel, "but I must lock you up, for fear of any surprise." He closed the door and fastened it.

Digitized by Google

The creaking of the lock, as the key rolled round in its rusty wards, and the heavy grating of the bolts as the soldier rudely shot them into their staples, fell with a jar upon the ears of the roving minstrel. He shuddered, the cold clammy sweat of fear was upon him. "A few minutes ago," said he to himself, "I was free to go whither I listed, now I am a prisoner in a dungeon." Reverently kissing the ring which the duke of Normandy had given him, and which he had been able to conceal from Pecquigny and his pillagers. "Odin," he murmured, "bestow courage upon me! O Loke, grant me cunning!" The voice of Harold was heard.

"By the rood, Alfnoth, I wot these fellows seek to murder us! some persons have entered the steps above, and yet they descend not as usual, neither have they any light."

"Perhaps it is some fresh prisoner."

"It may be so," resumed Harold, "if not, our chains are heavy, and with them we can break more than one head ere they break ours, even though it spoil our beer-cups in the Valhalla!"

"'Twould be hard to die without vengeance," said Alfnoth, "but hark—a footstep descends the stairs!"

"'Tis that of a friend," said a solemn but low voice. At that moment there was a flash of light, the dungeon became faintly illuminated, and they saw the minstrel descending with a taper.

"Who art thou?" cried Harold, "comest thou to us for evil or for good?"

"For good!"

"Approach not too near, or by the gods of Asgaard, I'll slay thee with these chains!" Saying this both he and Alfnoth clasped their manacled hands together, throwing the chains back over their shoulders, ready to strike.

"Behold, I am unarmed—I am a poor minstrel, and only seek to free you from thraldom." Saying this, he set the lamp upon the steps of the dungeon and approached the prisoner chiefs, saying, in hopes of ample reward, he and his friends had resolved to free them if possible.

"What are thy terms, and what is thy power?" said Harold.

Digitized by Google

"The terms made with a prisoner are seldom binding," said the astrologer, "the powerful know how to elude them; when thou art free, Ulric will discourse further with thee upon the reward. For the present let us speak of the means." He then shortly described what had passed between him and the duke of Normandy, relating how his companions had been made prisoners, and that he had obtained entrance through the friendship of Balder.

"Now" continued he, "there are two plans of escape open to ye. The one is immediately to quit the dungeon and escape with me into France or Normandy; this is attended with some danger, because the pursuit would be almost instant, and our death the probable consequence of recapture. The other is to trust to the power of the duke of Normandy; but to stimulate him to exertion, you must promise him your aid in securing the crown of England at the death of King Edward."

"Ay good minstrel," said Harold, "but ye said ere now that the terms made with a prisoner are seldom binding."

"Even so" said the astrologer, "but I did not say that a prisoner might not make them: make you the offer, sir earl, and let Duke William bind you as he best can; I have already shown him that it is his interest to free you."

"Be it so," said Harold; "but tell me—should I propose to leave the dungeon with you, how are we to accomplish it, being both chained to the wall?"

"I have brought the means with me" said the minstrel, taking a case from under his cloak; "this contains several small steel files, made in the form of daggers, they will cut any chain in a short time and be of use to defend you in case of need."

"By the beard of my grandfather!" said Harold, "but thou art a good fellow, and there is some sense in bringing us these weapons, though the better the file the worse the dagger, for the pure steel will snap with a blow; but they are better than none; and if we can cut our chains, they will prove good instruments of war; a strong arm and a brave heart will always find a weapon. Come! cut the manacles and begin with my friend Alfnoth."

"We must only cut through part of them," said the min-

Digitized by Google

strel, "leaving a portion that you can easily break off; and I have prepared some iron-coloured paste which will stick into the cut part, and conceal it from your jailer. But I shall leave the operation of cutting the chains to yourselves. Let us now consult which of the courses that I have proposed for your escape, will be the best for you to adopt."

"I have decided" said Harold. "I know not what interest you have with William, but tell him that I have refused to escape with you now, and that I will assist him by persuading Edward to make him heir to the throne of England, on the condition that he will confirm to me all the possessions of my family, and that he will betroth to me his infant daughter Adela in marriage." As he said these words, Alfnoth started and looked at him in amazement; the minstrel said nothing, and Harold continued,—

"Tell him if he will do these things, I will so serve him that Edgar Atheling shall never wear the crown of England; but, on the contrary, if I escape without his assistance he must not expect that I will do aught for his glory or his power. If I am put to death, my family and friends will all oppose him and assist Edgar Atheling, for such they all know was my intention. Now minstrel away! Tell William my resolves. Serve me well; I am neither humble nor unknown, and Harold was never yet ungrateful to his friends."

"And thou Childe of Sussex," said the minstrel, turning to Alfnoth, "what is thy decision?"

"Even to abide the will of the Norman duke," said Alfnoth. "Tell him that the Childe of Sussex has power equal to that of any earldorman in England, except Earl Harold, and the friends of both will make common cause to sustain the promises or avenge the death of their chiefs."

"All this I will say; but Harold, will the Saxons endure that thou shouldst wed a Norman princess?"

"Yes saucy minstrel!" said Harold, fiercely; "but put not thy questions to me, for I am master of my will, even in a dungeon."

"I cry your mercy great chief! I was wrong; but I have heard——" Here the bolts of the dungeon door above

Digitized by Google

were drawn back. The minstrel started—"By the sword of Lodbroke!" continued he, "but Balder keeps to his time; I trust he keeps his faith as punctually or we are lost."

The prisoners now collected their chains in their hands as usual, to make resistance in case of an attempt on their lives. The minstrel seized a dagger; but their fears were calmed by hearing the voice of the man-at-arms from above—"Ulric, 'tis time to depart; the guard will be here in half an hour."

"Chiefs" said Ulric, "you shall hear from me soon." He mounted the stairs, joined the sentinel, and descended from the tower in safety.

"Alfnoth," said Harold, when the astrologer had quitted the dungeon, "that vagabond has no doubt heard of Editha, and was about to express his insolent surprise at my offering to marry Adela; but thou knowest that Adela is an infant, and long ere she will be marriageable, Editha and I will have put an end to any arrangements made with Duke William in order to free myself from this cursed dungeon and his power. Heaven forbid that I should sacrifice Adela's affections, even were she of age, in a stratagem to save myself; but as she is an infant, I can break off the treaty of marriage the moment I become again at liberty, without any wrong but that of affronting the dignity of Duke William. This is but a small price to pay for our liberty and to get back to our beloved Editha."

"I guessed what your intentions were," said Alfnoth; "I have no fear for Editha on that score, but I tremble for her health when she hears of our imprisonment."

"Fear not for your daughter; the mind sustains the body; her mind is firm, her spirit commanding, they will bear every trial. I should be more surprised to hear of her being sick at Bodiam, than to see her and my brother Gurth enter the river Somme with a fleet! Yet that vagabond minstrel imagined I was going to give up her for Adela."

"And yet you meant he should," said Alfnoth, smiling.

"Yes by Odin! but though I was angry with the minstrel for thinking me a traitor to Editha, my heart yearned

Digitized by Google

towards him for taking her part. Hast ever seen him before?"

"I know him not; he seeks for guerdon I suppose."

"And great shall that be if he succeeds. By the skulls of my forefathers, half my broad lands in Kent shall go to have Ponthieu's count in my power! and the other half shall be the minstrel's: so shall my hate and gratitude keep pace, as they have ever done."

"The ceorl will be wealthy, for I too will guerdon him."

The object of these promises had meanwhile settled with Balder about future communications, and departed for Lillebonne, where he heard the duke had gone to Falaise, and had been sharply engaged with Geoffrey Martel; for, in alliance with the French king, William had invaded Anjou and carried Château Moulins by assault. There he learned that the French troops were drawing off towards the enemy, the count having effected a secret treaty with King Henry. William could not singly maintain his conquest, and retired to Falaise, where the minstrel found him.

"Ha! what news Ulric? Long hast thou been away. What says the count of Ponthieu?"

Ulric told his tale, and expressed great anxiety for his companions.

"By the mass! sir minstrel," said William, with a laugh, "your female companions' virtue is in some jeopardy when in charge of that Sir Pandarus, Pecquigny. But Harold! What ransom thinkest thou Ponthieu will demand?"

"Heaven knows!"

"Ay! and, by the mass! so do I. Canst thou write, minstrel!"

"Yea, sire."

"Good! Then sit thee down and indite what I shall tell thee.

"'WILLIAM OF NORMANDY TO GUION OF PONTHIEU, GREETING:—

"'By the God that made us twain, Sir Guion earl of Ponthieu, I will have Harold the Saxon, ransom or no ransom! Send him forthwith with all honour to me, and I will, in

Digitized by Google

sooth, give thee, as token of thanks, my rich manor on the river Yonne, for thee and thine to keep and to hold for evermore. But if thou rejectest my offer, then will I, with twenty thousand men-at-arms, batter the walls of Abbeville, —choose. Thy friend or foe,

"'WILLIAM OF NORMANDY.'

"Beshrew me minstrel, but the count of Ponthieu will think twice upon this note ere he treats you so saucily. I have long wished to have a quarrel with him, but he has always contrived to avoid it; now I shall have Harold, or my will of Abbeville, or Amiens. What ho there; Taillefer!"

The favourite esquire of the duke entered.

"Taillefer, our friend the count of Ponthieu must give Harold up, or break a lance with us Normans."

"*Tant mieux!*" said Taillefer laughing; "I hope he'll choose the last, by as much as I would rather see the faces of the pretty girls at Abbeville than the black beard of Harold at Rouen."

"Send a guard of twenty men-at-arms with the minstrel," continued William, "to protect him from Pecquigny and his blades, though I believe the caitiff is gone to Domfront to counsel his master; but many ill deeds are done under his name. It is necessary that our friend here should deliver his message safely; and though I am not willing to disbelieve what he relates of his misfortunes since he left Lillebonne, 'twere well, Taillefer, that you accompany him. Yet enter not the gates of Abbeville with thy men; and if thou seest nought to apprehend from superior forces on thy route, thou knowest well how to deal with Pecquigny's followers."

"Yea, verily, my liege! We most of us carry a hempen neck-cloth at our saddle-bow, to keep the count of Anjou's men from catching sore throats in case we meet any of them doing private business for themselves on the high road."

"Away then" said the duke. Taillefer with twenty men-at-arms and the minstrel were quickly on the road to Abbeville, where we shall leave them, to inquire after his companions, who were in the hands of Pecquigny.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIV.

Martel and Pecquigny with funny thought,
To make an interchange of torture sought,
But being incautious in their pleasant dealing,
Were made to try an interchange of feeling.

THE reader will recollect that we left Pecquigny and his prisoners on the road to Château Gontier, where they arrived without accident, though the young minstrel suffered much from the rude ribaldry of Pecquigny and his band. At the château they found orders to proceed to Domfront, where Geoffrey Martel was busily employed in rendering that fortress defensible against the attacks of Duke William, which he knew would not be long delayed. Pecquigny related to his master the news he had collected during his expedition, and the count ordered the prisoners to be brought before him.

"Well master," said he, "will you and these fair damsels enter the service of the count of Anjou? No man likes revelry better than myself, and you will pass a merry life when this blast of war blows over, which will soon be, for my alliance with France has turned the scale of war against the duke of Normandy."

"Willingly most noble count of Anjou!" said Lopez, bowing lowly as he spoke, "but may we not be set at liberty, for it ill sorts with our jovial and roving disposition to be thus guarded like prisoners and culprits? We bear no arms, we are friends to all sides; let us then roam about about according to our custom, and, God willing, we will return to thee at thy appointed time."

"No young springald! singing birds are best in cages; we shall soon be besieged in Domfront, and ye shall amuse the damsels of this place, to cheer their spirits in time of danger: besides, you have been employed by the duke of Normandy, and I have my fears of ye; remain then in Domfront; and you, Pecquigny, have an eye to them."

Digitized by Google

At this moment a messenger entered and informed the count that his two spies at Rouen had been executed by order of Duke William. These two men had been sent by Geoffrey Martel secretly to inform him of all that passed in the capital of Normandy: they were both gentlemen of the law, and their chief affair was secretly to search the records of Rouen in order to establish the claims of a fair damsel of Domfront, of whom the count of Anjou was desperately enamoured.

"And who brought this news?"

"This peasant my liege!" answered the messenger, pointing to a countryman who stood behind him.

"Art certain of their death?" asked the count addressing himself to the peasant.

"I saw them die myself; they were put on the rack for half an hour three successive days, at Falaise, and then executed publicly by Duke William's order."

"Then, by heavens, I will be avenged!" cried Anjou in a rage. "Pecquigny, are there any Norman prisoners of note in the dungeon of Domfront?"

"No: but if my liege recollects, these minstrels were employed by William, and are probably in his confidence."

"So! to the prison with them; unless I can get better victims they shall die in all the tortures that my vengeance can invent."

"They will make pretty sport upon the scaffold" said Pecquigny, "though I fear this young cockerel will hardly maintain his vivacity under the tender attentions of Coupe-gorge, who flatters himself he can keep a delicate subject longer alive under torture than most executioners."

During this brutal speech the two women had fainted; the young minstrel looked pale and terrified, but still maintained his presence of mind.

"Noble count" said he in a faltering voice, and coming forward from the back part of the chamber, "surely you will not harm us; we have no connection with the duke of Normandy. We are poor minstrels, merely the bearers of a message to the count of Ponthieu."

"Away with them to the dungeon!" cried the furious Geoffrey Martel.

Digitized by Google

"Not so, I pray thee!" cried the youth falling at the count's feet, and clasping his knees: "oh mercy, mercy, great count! I entreat thee in the name of justice and of God!"

"Avaunt thee young devil!" exclaimed Geoffrey, ferociously seizing the minstrel by the throat. "By heaven I believe thou art not what thou seemest. Tell the executioner to bring his instruments of torture here; I will quickly make thee discover thyself."

"Miscreant do thy worst!" said the young man suddenly casting off the count's grasp and rising, pale and trembling but with a resolute and decided voice; "'tis true I am not what I seem; but who I am thou shalt not know. O God, protect me in this hour of need!" he cried, raising his hands to heaven, and again kneeling in an agony of prayer as the executioner approached and seized him by the collar.

"Off with these clothes!" said the brute, "I can't do my work with any comfort upon one wrapped up in cloaks and doublets." The female companions of the minstrel now uttered screams of agony and vainly endeavoured to run towards the youth, but were prevented by their guards. Very different was the conduct of the two male prisoners; they gave a glance at each other, muttered a few words, and in an instant four of the guards lay sprawling upon the ground; the executioner was bleeding and senseless at the feet of his victim, whom Ivar caught in his arms, and sprang with the youth behind Kenred; he had thrown himself upon the count, and with one hand seized him by the throat, while with the other he twisted Martel's sword out of his hand, and placing the point to his breast, cried in a loud voice "If any one moves hand or foot I will destroy the count!" The tumult in an instant subsided.

"Count" said Kenred, "pardon the insult I offer to you: my comrade and myself are strong and valiant men and we care not for our lives; rather than that youth should be injured we will destroy you and many more, for we will sell ourselves dearly."

"On what terms," said the count, "shall we treat? It will serve you nothing to destroy me as you would instantly be destroyed yourselves."

Digitized by Google

"I know that," said Kenred; "all I ask is protection and safety for that youth and those two maidens: on us two you may wreak your vengeance if so it please you."

"No!" cried the youth, "security to all—if not, strike, Kenred!"

"For all, willingly," said the count.

"But what security have I sir count, that you will keep your word?"

"My promise—what else can I give in such an extremity?"

"There are many knights present in this chamber," said the young minstrel in a trembling and scarcely articulate voice, for nature seemed to faint under the terrors and desperation of the scene; "will they swear on their swords, and by their fidelity to their mistresses, that they will hold the count of Anjou to his promise?"

"We swear!" cried many of the knights; "we swear upon our swords, and by the beauty of our mistresses, that the count shall hold his promise."

"Then let the count loose Kenred," said the youth. Kenred obeyed the order and returned the count his sword. All were again made prisoners.

"You shall be treated with all due respect according to my promise" said the count; "and now in courtesy tell me that which you denied to threats."

"It may not be" answered the youth, "my story is a sad one, it has driven me into the pursuits of a minstrel, and concerns neither Normans nor Angevins; this is the first time I ever was in these countries, but to be known would be injurious to myself and to others. You and these knights are pledged to my security."

"Even so!" said several of the knights, and a murmur of approbation was heard through the chamber, for all were interested by the modest and graceful behaviour of the youth; his tender age and fragile frame in some measure excused the nervous weakness he had betrayed in the momentary scuffle that had taken place, and in which he was almost perfectly passive; besides, the proud and resolute spirit which he had exhibited seemed to prove that it was in bodily vigour and not in personal courage that he failed.

Digitized by Google

"Be it as you will," said Martel, fiercely; "but if I promised security, I did not promise liberty: to prison with them Pecquigny!"

"But with good treatment and perfect safety, count of Anjou," said a knight with great fierceness; "for we are pledged to their protection by an oath as strong as that which binds us to thy service, and we will not be forsworn."

"No! no!" cried many of the knights with vehemence, "we have sworn upon our swords, and with our swords will we keep the oath."

"Sirs, I too have sworn," answered Geoffrey with the forced calmness of anger curbed by fear.

"I question much," rejoined the fierce and haughty knight who had first addressed him,—"I question much whether the imprisoning of these minstrels is the fulfilment of your promise."

"How know I that they are not spies of the Norman," answered Geoffrey, violently agitated.

"What care I if they be spies," answered the knight, "I fear neither the Normans nor their duke."

"Methinks you love them!" said the count of Anjou: "if so, you had better join them."

"If I respected my oath no more than I respect you I would," said the knight, shaking his fist insolently towards the count of Anjou; "but if I do, fifteen hundred stanch followers attend me, which methinks the count of Anjou can ill spare in times like these."

"Such insolence is not to be borne!" cried Pecquigny.

"Bear that then!" said the knight, whose gigantic stature towered above that of every other man present, "bear that!" said he, and his gauntleted hand rung upon the head of Pecquigny who went reeling to the ground.

"By heavens! this is not to be borne!" said the count, rising from his seat and half drawing his sword.

"You may have more to bear yet, so put up your sword and don't chafe yourself about that craven," said the knight calmly, pointing to Pecquigny, who by this time had risen, and quitted the room, vowing vengeance. The count flung himself back into his chair; "Bear off those minstrels to prison!" said he furiously.

Digitized by Google

"With gentle treatment," added the knight in a stern voice, "I summon all here upon their honour as knights to attend me daily to the prison, that we may learn from these minstrels if our promise be kept to them."

"We all regard our promise as much as you do," said the count sharply.

"I doubt it not," answered the knight; "but I trust my word in no man's keeping, and I believe those pledged with me hold the same opinion."

"Even so!" said several voices together.

"Withdraw the prisoners, I say," exclaimed the count, peevishly to his guards. "Good morning, knights! at present I have no farther occasion for your counsel:" then starting up, he abruptly left the apartment. As the minstrels withdrew, the youth made an obeisance to the tall knight, saying: "Sir, your chivalrous conduct commands our eternal gratitude."

"I would like to fight at thy side against Normans," muttered Kenred.

"Ye are two brave men!" said the knight, shaking hands with Kenred, "nor would I wish for better followers."

When Pecquigny quitted the apartment of the count, he was accompanied by his friends, Hubert the priest and Coupe-gorge the executioner.

"Pecquigny," said Hubert, "I think your ears must have tingled, after that pat, as if all the church bells in Domfront were ringing in them."

"Ay! by the halter that hanged my grandfather!" cried Coupe-gorge, "but a gentleman ought not to be used so roughly. I thought that tall fellow would have spoiled sport."

"Sport!" exclaimed Pecquigny.

"Yes man; I thought he'd have killed you outright—and I want ye to die leisurely, that I may know how so good a Christian would take leave of the world."

"Oh! I'd shrive him," said Hubert, laughing; "his conscience should be as clean as the chin of a newly-shaved bridegroom."

"Do that Hubert, and you're quits with the devil for

Digitized by Google

ever; clever fellow as he is, he could not give you a harder job than that, not even if the soul of the count himself were in your hands."

"What! not a word Pecquigny to throw at a dog."

"No! that damned fellow's gauntlet fell so hard that it has jumbled all my ideas together; and I can scarce distinguish the pleasures of murder from rape."

"I should think it knocked all pleasure out of your head."

"No Hubert," grinned Coupe-gorge, "nothing can knock the pleasure of sin out of Pecquigny's head; such a slap on the chops may have jumbled his sins together, but he would rather think of them in the lump, than not at all!"

"Curse your jesting! I'm thinking how to have vengeance."

"What! upon that tall fellow with fifteen hundred ragamuffins at his back? No, no, my friend," continued the priest, affecting a look of piety, and casting up his eyes to heaven, "summon all your Christian virtues, dear brother, and being 'smitten on one cheek, turn the other.'"

"Truly most holy father!" said Pecquigny, in a tone less pious than that of the priest, "if the right cheek receive such a blow as the left has, I ween that my Christian resignation would soon meet its reward; for in the present confused state of my ideas, I cannot well imagine a shorter cut to heaven; now let us think of vengeance."

"Think for yourself; Coupe-gorge's talents in that way are hired by the count of Anjou."

"And my holy avocation forbids vengeance; I will have nought to say to it if it takes the shape of fingering a giant; but if you mortally wound him Pecquigny I'll shrive him gratis; that is, if he has no more sin on his conscience than the broad hint he gave you to hold your tongue."

"I'll be the death of him," said Pecquigny, peevishly.

"I saw four strong fellows trying to execute the same threat once," replied the priest.

Digitized by Google

"And why did they fail in their project?"

"Why! they repented, but he left them no breath to beg his pardon; when I got up they hadn't a wink in their eyes to look at the crucifix. 'Are they dead priest?' said he to me; 'As door nails, sir knight.' 'So much the better,' continued he, 'there are four rogues less in the world than there were ten minutes ago.' 'Won't ye give me something to pray for their souls?' 'No knave! in God's name, let the devil have his own; I like justice;' and he walked away as calmly as if nothing had happened."

"What think ye of that?" said Coupe-gorge, jeeringly, for Pecquigny's courage was not held in high estimation by his companions.

"Think! why what should I think? but that they were four stupid fools for risking their precious lives against an overgrown brute like that; I'll make safer work with him!"

"Ay! a little Italian soup I suppose."

"Never mind what it is."

"Ay, ay!" chimed in Coupe-gorge, "never mind what it is, so that Pec does the job; and then the count will hand him over, body and soul, to you and me Hubert, by way of satisfying the vengeance of the giant's relations. My poor Pec! how tenderly Hubert and I would treat you!" Here the party separated, Pecquigny not being in a humour to enjoy the pleasantries of his companions.

The reader must be informed that Pecquigny's quick glance had discovered the youthful minstrel to be a woman. She had always kept her short cloak fastened across her bosom; but when Coupe-gorge attempted to strip her, its form was for an instant discovered. In the confusion which at that moment took place, no one had observed this but Pecquigny and one other man—and at once all the bad passions of the former were roused by her beauty; his quick conception telling him the moustachios of the youth were artificial, minstrels being expert in such disguises. Ruminating on this discovery, he determined to satisfy himself on that point, and then force the object of them to submit to

Digitized by Google

his base desires; but he kept the secret in his own bosom, for so much beauty would at once become the property of his master. He therefore directed his steps towards the prison, the jailer of which was one of his basest tools; and as governor of the town of Domfront, he had the immediate command and superintendence of the dungeon.

"Hudson," said he to the jailer, "those minstrels must be well treated, as the youngest appears to be a person of distinction, although the count can't yet discover who he is; you must give him the small well-furnished apartment kept by prisoners of the highest rank; but do this before the other prisoners, as a mark of honour, and give the two women an apartment to themselves. I believe, Hudson, there is a small pipe which opens in a secret manner to the neighbouring chamber."

"Yes Sir Pecquigny, we have it for listening to what passes between two prisoners, who, thinking themselves alone in a small chamber, communicate their secrets to each other: the lowest whisper is heard."

"Well, I thought I recollected something of that kind; give me the key of the large chamber, and go and transfer the two women and the young minstrel to the small one." Hudson did so, and Pecquigny immediately placed himself in the larger chamber to listen. In a few minutes the three prisoners were introduced and locked in.

"This seems a more comfortable chamber," observed Lopez, "and I have great misgivings as to the reason of our being placed here. Attend to what I say; speak not a word that would betray us, for I have heard that there are strange communications in these prisons of France and Normandy."

"Ho!" muttered Pecquigny, as he heard this, "cunning as we think ourselves we're never a match for these devils of women; they are as wary as magpies, and a man may trudge all day without catching them."

"Let us examine every part of the room," continued the young minstrel, "for we may be seen as well as heard."

"Lord! dear lady!"

Digitized by Google

"Hush!" and the young minstrel stopped Rose's mouth abruptly.

"Too late!" said Pecquigny to himself, grinning with delight, as his squinting eyes twinkled with pleasure at the thoughts of consummating his evil projects, "and who the devil can she be? no matter, she is a devilish handsome girl, and that is all that concerns me."

"I have it," whispered Winifred, who had been carefully examining every part of the room; "here is a hole, and on applying my ear to it I heard a person breathing distinctly."

"I expected that," said the youthful minstrel.

"But," rejoined Winifred in a low voice and pressing her finger upon the hole, "we can talk without their hearing us, for all that."

"We had better say nothing which we fear being heard, because there may be more of these pipes, of which we are not aware. Rose, I fear, has already betrayed that I am a woman; but still call me Lopez, even in secret."

Pecquigny finding they had stopped the tube through which he was listening, quitted the room, and went into the chamber where the damsels were. They shuddered upon seeing his hateful countenance.

"Ladies, excuse me; though so grossly insulted by that huge knight, Sir Auvrai Gigaut, I am as anxious as he can be to see that you are gently used. It was always my wish to see females treated with that delicacy and respect which is due to their sex; and indeed," added he, turning to Rose and Winifred, "you know that I protected you from the insolence of my band, which I assure you was a matter of no small difficulty: I speak in confidence, the count of Anjou himself is so reckless with respect to women, that he encourages all our ruffians to the greatest outrages upon the sex. As to you, fair maiden," turning to the youth, "if I was uncourteous it was because I was unable to penetrate through your disguise as a minstrel; but when the rude hand of the executioner displaced your mantle, though but for an instant, I had still time to discover that it shaded the bosom of a lovely woman. Now fair lady, to convince you of the devotion and respect which shall govern my conduct towards you, I will not divulge your secret, which was discovered by

Digitized by Google

no one but myself. I would ask by what name and title I should address you."

"Sir, I am the minstrel Lopez; and I desire no other appellation. You seem to have conjectured more than your sight warranted."

"Not so fair maiden; I, as governor of Domfront, must be assured, and therefore, if so it pleases you, I will inform the count of Anjou who will take summary measures for verifying your sex."

"Oh! no, no! for the love of the Virgin Sir Pecquigny, tell not the count!" cried out the youth in an agony of terror. "I own all to you—I am a woman; but for Heaven's sake guard my secret I entreat you by all the laws of honour. Protect me, and in time you shall be rewarded. Oh save me from the count!"

"I will be true to you fair lady," and the vile Pecquigny endeavoured to give tenderness to his voice, while his whole visage was so inflamed by the basest passions as to make her blood curdle with fear. "Adieu now, but lady mine you must not have these two maidens, who I suppose are your servants. You must not, I say, have them to sleep in your apartment, or your secret will at once be betrayed to the count, for propriety demands that the three men should sleep in the same room; but I can, without impropriety, order the jailer to give you this apartment to yourself."

Pecquigny went away, and the young minstrel, forgetting her caution in her terror, cried aloud, "Oh God! we are lost in the hands of this fiend! I am almost tempted to throw myself on the protection of the count of Anjou; anything is better than being in the power of this detestable wretch."

"No!" said Pecquigny to himself, for on leaving the ladies he had entered the listening chamber to hear the remarks made by the women upon his visit—"no, you shall have no communication with Martel till Pecquigny is tired of you, and then you shall go to the menagerie of Geoffrey count of Anjou as a novelty." Leaving word that he would call that night at eleven to see the young minstrel alone, he quitted the prison. At mid-day several knights headed, by the brave Auvrai Gigaut, arrived, and insisted on seeing the prisoner minstrels to ascertain that they were well treated. All

Digitized by Google

soon departed, except Auvrai, who took the young minstrel by the hand, and drew him to one of the deep windows of the prison chamber. Pecquigny was mistaken in supposing that he alone had discovered the sex of the prisoner. Auvrai's eye was no less sharp than his; and it was this discovery that made him assume the bold tone he had put on towards the count. Auvrai was a man of immense stature, firm in mind, tender in heart, and of the purest honour; in short he was as perfect a knight as the age could produce, and had long contemplated to abandon the service of the count of Anjou, whom he had only followed in obedience to the orders of the French king. On taking the maiden to the window he there held a short and eager conversation with her, but none heard the words which passed, for Winifred had placed her hand upon the listening tube. The knight then took leave.

When day had passed, and that darkness which crime loves fell, Pecquigny again appeared at the prison and ordered Hudson the jailer to open the chamber where the minstrel was alone, into which he entered, closing the door after him. On hearing the door unbarred the prisoner awoke from her feverish and troubled sleep. Finding that there was no fastening on the inside, she had not undressed herself, and now sprung from her pallet in terror.

"Who is that?" cried she in agony.

"It is only I," said Pecquigny.

"Only you Sir Pecquigny!" she knew his hateful voice, "only you—quit this room instantly sir!"

"That must not be fair lady; I come on important business," and turning the shade of a dark lantern he enlightened the chamber. "What! not in bed lady!"

"Quit this chamber instantly or I will give an alarm."

"You can give no alarm, maiden mine; your screams however loud would create none. I often come here at night to put criminals to the torture; female shrieks are too common to excite curiosity; and to Hudson, the jailer, a prisoner's agonies are like the dew of heaven to the parched earth. Be advised—I come only for your good."

Saying this he set the lantern down, and lighting a lamp which Hudson now brought him, he told the latter he might

Digitized by Google

go, as he should be some time with the prisoner. The jailer left the apartment, giving a sinister glance at the young minstrel.

"Now lady, I will be plain with you. I am enamoured of your beauty and am resolved to possess such charms as are rarely seen. Be assured you shall be sole mistress of my affections—you shall have no rival in the heart of Pecquigny: and my power is great, for the count of Anjou is under my control; he cannot do without such a minister to his pleasures as myself, and I know too much to be dismissed: 'tis true he would murder me if it suited his convenience to do so—but to what profit? He could not again get a Pecquigny: and a Pecquigny he must have. I am faithful, and I am safe; besides, all about him are my creatures; if he whispered an idea dangerous to me he would soon be a dead man. He is, therefore, tied to me by his safety, his interests, and by sentiment, for he could find no man so congenial to him. We are neither of us a check upon the other. Now lady, my irregular life has arisen from never having before met with a person whose beauty charmed me as yours has done. You I must possess, or die. I have always made it a rule with the fair sex to speak rationally, and show them that even though they did not love me it was their interest to be kind to my wishes. I shall act the same part with you; you are in my power, and I am resolved to use force if fair means fail: but I offer you fortune, and my love. If you reject these, then take the fate which so many maidens have experienced. There are places in this prison where you would be never heard of more."

"Have you done sir, have you done?" said she with a firm and haughty voice of command.

Pecquigny, somewhat startled at her majestic manner answered "Yes—I have set the choice before you, a willing acceptance of my affections and riches, or dishonour; and death when I am tired of you."

"Neither the one nor the other, traitor! there is a God in heaven who will defend the weak if they but trust in him! O holy Virgin, intercede for me in this hour of danger! God protect me!" and she raised her clasped hands towards heaven in an agony of prayer. Then

Digitized by Google

turning to Pecquigny she added, "I feel my safety—I defy thee, thou wretch—thou canst not harm me! Weak woman that I am, and here imprisoned, I am protected from a wretch like thee—quit my room instantly!" Pecquigny was for a moment staggered by this speech, and by the imposing manner in which he was addressed. Had there been any equality between the position in which they stood to each other the base panderer to Martel's pleasures would have been daunted; but he felt his power, and his cowardly heart instantly resumed its calmness and all its atrocity of intention. The maiden, seeing him hesitate for an instant, attempted to quit the room; but Pecquigny seized her with his iron grasp, saying, "Not so fast fair dame; whither wouldst thou go? Come, come!" added he, clasping her in his arms, "no trifling with Pecquigny."

It was in vain she struggled and shrieked, as he bore her back from the door further into the chamber. Exhausted by exertion of mind and by terror, her power to make further resistance was nearly gone, when at this critical moment Hudson knocked at the door.

"Sir Pecquigny, the count sends for you in all haste; the Normans are at the gates, the garrison in arms on the wall. There have been messengers in all directions looking for you."

"Curse you and the count, and the Normans, and the whole crew of you; would you were all in hell together!" muttered Pecquigny, as he thrust the exhausted maiden from him with great violence; then blowing out the lamp and seizing the lantern, he opened the door and quitted the prison.

For some days passing events obliged Pecquigny to go forth into the country, but on the tenth he returned and resolved to carry his designs against the fair minstrel into execution that night. During these ten days the brave Auvrai and his friends daily visited the prisoner; and the day following the night in which Pecquigny had so alarmed the maiden minstrel, she again spoke in private to that "preux chevalier," Auvrai Gigaut. What passed between them will appear in the sequel; but as she knew Pecquigny was away, the maiden slept in tranquillity till the day he returned unexpectedly to Domfront.

Digitized by Google

In the evening, which was destined to be an eventful one for her, she heard from Auvrai that the count had that day quitted Domfront, to avoid being shut up in the besieged town; and as she knew that the traitor Pecquigny wanted to conceal her from his master, she felt well assured that he would lose no time in turning the count's absence to his own advantage. Her fears were well grounded, for Pecquigny had not arrived above an hour when his infamous project was resumed. Night came and he repaired secretly to the prison, enveloped in his cloak and shaded by darkness. He entered the chamber, where he found the maiden ready dressed in her dreary cell, but no light was burning. As he opened the door, she whispered, "I expected you sooner, but though I have made up my mind to trust myself to you, the step is fearful—oh, be faithful and true to me or I am the most lost, the most wretched of women!"

"Ah, hah you are a dear girl! said Pecquigny, with delight twinkling in his small grey eyes; "a little reasoning always succeeds with women." A chill of horror fell upon the maiden when she heard his hateful voice, but presence of mind rarely fails women in the hour of need; their native courage gathers into a fearless state—it may be called desperation, but is equal to extraordinary trials. The maiden at once assumed a determined calmness; Pecquigny had opened his dark lantern, but the light fell not on her face, and he saw not the changes of her beautiful countenance which, in the light of day, would have betrayed her agony.

"Yes I am resolved to do your bidding Sir Pecquigny; but it must be on my own terms."

"On any terms fair maiden, but mine you must be—even this hour."

"Oh no, not now!" said she, seeking to gain time, "I must talk with you. In the first place, promise me on the faith of a knight that you will never desert me."

"I swear! never!"

"Then assure me, on your honour, that no other maiden has claims upon your affections."

"None!" said Pecquigny, as he lighted a lamp and drew near, and seated her on a chair, drawing his own close to

Digitized by Google

hers. "I swear to you my angel, that you reign unrivalled mistress of my affections; but why look so eagerly towards the door my love? Oh, I see, I have not shut it, and thy maiden fears shrink from intrusion;" saying this he jumped up and closed the door; and again seated himself by her side. "Don't be so anxious my lovely one, no one is awake, or at large in this prison but Hudson, and he dare not intrude upon us; none can see, none can hear what passes." And inflamed by the consciousness of privacy and the powerless state in which he held the object of his passion, he clasped her at once in his arms. She threw him from her with a strength almost incredible in one apparently so feeble.

"Keep off, sir—what noise is that?"

"None my little virago, none! only Hudson stirring about;" and inflamed by the resistance he had just encountered he again threw his arms around her with the violence of one resolved to do his will, overpowering her strength and heeding not her screams, when suddenly Auvrai Gigaut stood in complete armour before them. The maiden had fallen senseless on the floor of the chamber as the knight entered.

"This intrusion, sir knight, upon the governor, when in the examination of a state prisoner, is unpardonable insolence—quit the apartment instantly!"

"Assuredly I will gentle knight," said Auvrai, with the most provoking humility of manner, "and leave your excellency alone in it." As he said these words, he seized Pecquigny by the throat with the grasp of a vice, and laying him on the floor in no gentle manner, with the other hand raised the maiden's head, who now recovered her sensibility.

"Dear lady be comforted—you are safe! summon all your courage, for we have need of much exertion."

"Oh, I am all ready!" exclaimed she, fast recovering, "in a moment I shall be quite well; is that wretch gone?"

"No, here he is at your side, but rather nervous, and with some reason, for I have not done with him and time presses."

"Insolent knight! I desire to be let free from your brutal grasp instantly,—what ho! Hudson, to the rescue!" shouted Pecquigny with a desperate yell.

Digitized by Google

"Call not for Hudson; you have short time to spare brave sir—keep your wind to say your prayers, for I have no priest to shrive you."

"O God! are you then going to murder me?"

"No! not exactly that; I do not call it murder; I am only going to execute you."

"Ha, ha, ha! you jest sir knight, you jest," said Pecquigny, forcing an hysterical laugh, "noble and excellent Sir Auvrai, you jest—let me go."

"By no means," answered his calm and deliberate foe, as he shook a rope loose which Pecquigny had not before observed: "by no means; I never jest on these occasions; no more than you did when you endeavoured to bribe my esquire to poison me ten days ago. I did laugh *then*, and intended to make you do single combat with my esquire, who resolved to demand the trial by battle with you; but as your ill luck has thrown you into my hands, with the added crime of an attempt to dishonour this helpless maiden, I must even cheat your friend Coupe-gorge, and do justice on you myself."

"Oh, you are not serious Sir Auvrai; come, come, you jest, you only jest—surely you do not really mean to kill me! Oh God no! you are too noble and too brave, you are not in earnest!" But the knight proceeded coolly to adjust the rope round his neck, unheeding his piteous cries for mercy, which, resounding in that small chamber, wrung the heart of the poor trembling damsel.

"You will not kill him I hope Sir Auvrai; only fasten him to prevent his following us," said she with a troubled voice.

"Dear lady I will prevent his following us; but here, take these keys, they will unlock the chamber where your companions are; and let them be ready, I will be with you in a few minutes."

"Oh no, no! go not away sweet lady! for God's sake save me! Oh, save me! Mercy, mercy!"

The maiden minstrel flew away in an agony of terror, for she saw, by the way in which the knight was proceeding, what he was resolved upon doing; and so did Pecquigny, whose cries and prayers for mercy were incessant and frantic.

Digitized by Google

His convulsive struggles were as vain as his prayers; the knight held him as a man would an infant, and having fastened the rope, looked round and saw a large hook projecting above a niche in the wall, where formerly was placed the image of a saint, for the prison had been a convent. To this hook he fastened the rope, drawing up the shrieking recreant, whose arms and legs clung round him in all the desperation of despair. When he had secured the rope, he fastened Pecquigny's hands behind him with his own handkerchief, and then, freeing himself from the grasp of his legs, the wretch swung dangling from the hook. Soon he got his toes on the jut of the niche, but this gave him little help; his head and chest were thrown forward, as with his feet he vainly sought for support. His horrid countenance grew more hideous than ever, his eyes were protruded from their sockets by the pent-up blood, he stared fearfully, his face was swollen and fiery, and his convulsed mouth sent forth the croaking shriek of approaching strangulation.

"Wretch! a thousand victims of your horrid cruelty call for vengeance on you: there hang like a ruffian as you are. If I had the weakness to let you go, I should burden my conscience with all the crimes you pass your life in committing. Adieu then Pecquigny! may your foul deeds find mercy before God, who has made me the instrument of his just vengeance in this world, and of protection to those whose life you would have rendered miserable by your vileness and your murders."

Saying these words the gigantic knight left the room.

The minstrels had now all assembled, and heard the death-sounds gurgling in the throat of the vile Pecquigny.

"Peace be to his soul!" said the maiden shuddering.

"God bless the hand that choked you!" said Kenred, as he looked into the apartment where Pecquigny was hanging. "Ivar, come here and look man; wouldn't he make a pretty figure-head for a war-galley?"

"No Kenred, no! by Niord, he would frighten the she-fishes out of their senses!"

"Oh God! this is dreadful!" cried the damsel.

Digitized by Google

"We have no time to lose," remarked Sir Auvrai, and he led the way down to the prison door.

Here they found the base Hudson waiting, sorely against his will; for he was on his back, firmly tied to a large form and gagged with the tongs of his fireplace, which the powerful Auvrai had placed open in his mouth, and then twisted the legs together behind his head.

"I have half a mind to put this miscreant to death," said Auvrai, hesitating for a moment; "he is not a bit better than Pecquigny and Martel."

Hudson was pale as ashes; he put his hands together, and whined through his gag as if to pray for mercy; but the knight did not seem greatly disposed to pity, and looked round, saying to the minstrels, "Do ye see a rope anywhere?"

"Oh spare him—spare him!" cried the maiden in an agony of suffering, and looking with imploring eyes at the knight, on whose arm she laid her hand.

"Well, be it as you wish; but he would not have spared you. He is a horrid villain; yet he shall live. I trust he will not get loose and give the alarm."

"I'll be hanged if he does," said Ivar; "the most he can do is to get his hands together for a bit of an 'Ave Maria,' as he lies there grinning at his conscience, with the tongs in his mouth to remind him of hell fire!"

"Silence Ivar!" said Winifred; "how can you talk so horribly!"

The knight now opened the great door of the prison, closing it carefully when they got out.

Crossing the court, they came to the outer gate: here they found the commander of the guard.

"Sir Auvrai I know you well—but are your companions to pass?"

"They are the minstrels; the governor will not refuse his permission to let them pass to my house. I wish to have a merry day to-morrow; we have made up our quarrel for the blow, and he can now deny me no favour. Behold his signet, which I had this moment from his finger; for he remains in the jail, perforce, on business which is so knotty that I doubt whether he get clear of it to-night."

Digitized by Google

"I thought so, observed the officer of the guard, for I heard some shrieking, which seemed as if he was applying the torture pretty tightly. It sounded as if it was a woman."

"Ay, and a man too, I think," said the sentry, "for I heard a male yelp I'll swear. The governor is the devil for making them sing; never was I sentry when Pecquigny visited the prison without hearing some squeaking. He is a man who takes pleasure in screwing a prisoner. I was once with him when we hanged an old couple in a wood in Brabant; they came running after their daughter that the count carried off, and he just hanged them in sport, for they could not have followed us twenty yards farther,—poor old devils! 'Don't hang them quite,' said he, 'just let their toes touch the ground to save our consciences: I don't wish to commit murder—if they like to die it's their own fault, they may stand on tiptoe like a dancing-master if it pleases them!'"

The maiden shuddered at these words and could scarcely support herself as she hung upon the knight's arm.

"Come on!" said the knight; "keep Sir Pecquigny's signet, and give it to him when he leaves the prison. Good night!"

"God speed you, Sir Auvrai."

"Now to horse!" cried the knight, as he reached his own quarters; "we must not lose an instant."

He proceeded to his own stables, where his esquire and another armed man awaited him, and without calling a groom they saddled eight horses and issued forth; but he first armed Ivar and Kenred. On reaching the gates he was challenged by the watch, which that night being formed of Sir Auvrai's men-at-arms, he was instantly let out, and the drawbridge again raised.

"I shall be soon back," said Sir Auvrai; "but if I do not return in one hour, call out all my men-at-arms, and follow me on the route towards Coutances."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXV.

Fair Editha being rescued, and safe,
Geoffrey and Auvrai each other chafe,
Duke William threatens Guy of Ponthieu,
Who answers "Little I care for you;"
But the Vala soothes his raging ire,
And pulls Earl Harold out of the fire.

SIR AUVRAI and the fugitives had not gone far when the day broke, and not far from them, upon an eminence, stood a large force in battle-array, from the main body of which instantly a party descended upon them.

"By the saints!" cried Auvrai, "I see the standard of Geoffrey Martel! there is some work toward here; we must not let them come up to us. Away in the direction of the Norman camp: make for the forest ladies!"

Rapidly they turned their horses' heads; and the maidens, putting theirs to full speed, kept ahead of the men, who were all heavily armed. The other party pressed forward with loud cries, gaining upon the fugitives; and the latter, attempting to reach the wood on a shorter cut, were arrested by a deep ditch, and obliged to turn and regain the road, which they scarcely accomplished when the enemy had approached so near that there remained but small chance of escape.

"Now" cried Auvrai, "now show yourselves men and follow me!"

At these words he turned his steed towards the pursuers, followed by Ivar, Kenred, his esquire, and Ulric, who had suddenly appeared. The shock was severe: their enemies were accomplished knights, and the companions of Auvrai went down at the first encounter, all except the esquire. Auvrai overthrew all he met, and passed through the enemy; then turning, he drove furiously back to assist his

Digitized by Google

friends. His lance was broken, but with his sword he fought the numbers who assailed him, while others pursued and overtook the females.

Auvrai's companions were now on foot, fighting with the fury of desperate men, but, overpowered by numbers, they must quickly have succumbed, when lo! at that critical instant three knights suddenly appeared hard by; they rode at full speed, their horses covered with foam, their lances in the rest, their visors down.

"By the beard of my father!" said Auvrai, "but if these knights are true men, they will help us."

At these words Ulric set up a loud and strange shriek, which was answered by the careering knights with that ringing shout of battle, "*Dex aie!*"

"Normans by God!" said Auvrai, as he echoed, "*Dex aie!* ho!" in a voice of thunder, striking down his most pressing enemy at the same moment.

The strange knights charged at once upon those who had captured the women; these made a stout but short resistance, all were unhorsed and slain by the redoubted champions who had thus offered their timely aid.

"Fly towards the wood and you are safe my beloved!" cried one of the champions to the maiden minstrel, and the voice of Harold and her father burst upon the heart of Editha—she was safe!

There was no time for parley; the brave Auvrai and his courageous companions were in fearful peril, and the knights rushed on to their assistance. The peculiar armour worn by the count of Anjou made him known; Auvrai tried to reach him in vain, he knew the force of Gigaut's arm too well, and kept aloof, when suddenly the well-known voice of William of Normandy cried,

"Traitor of Anjou! I have thee at last," and crashing on the count's helm, the Norman's terrible lance tore it with resistless violence from the wounded head, horse and man being dashed to the ground! But William's charger slipped and fell. Quickly he extricated himself, but Anjou had been quicker, and escaped on a fresh horse which stood close to him; he fled towards the great body of his

Digitized by Google

troops, from which reinforcements were now approaching at a gallop.

The flight of Martel made his men also give way to the handful of knights who now engaged them.

"Sir duke," said Auvrai, "had we not best retire to the wood; methinks we shall be overmatched?"

"Not a foot, brave Sir Auvrai Gigaut; for by the splendour of God! I will trounce those knaves into Domfront—and out of it too, ere many suns set upon the recreant head of Anjou!"

"But, sir duke, we are outmatched, and the best knight must cede to numbers."

"Ay Sir Auvrai, as a knight I would retire; but I am also a general. Look ye there!"

Hardly had the words passed his lips when all the Norman chivalry, headed by Sir William Fitz Osborne and myself, good Robert Wace—for I was loved by the duke even then—were seen issuing from the wood in battle-array, the sun flickering and flashing with a fitful light along the sparkling cuirasses, as the steel-clad warriors advanced.

"Shall we give ground now Sir Auvrai?" cried William laughing, as the enemy suddenly halted.

"No by the mass! great duke; I spoke as a knight tired with unhorsing and slaying enemies; and by my troth! my poor charger is hardly able to bear my weight: your liege's horse excepted, few carry such heavy men. Methinks I am about your grace's weight, though barely so."

"I think so sir knight; but I am not yet come to mine justly. Large men do not soon arrive at their full growth."

"May I ask, my liege, who those knights are that so bestirred themselves in this fight, and have followed the maidens?"

"They are Saxon knights; one is her father, the Childe of Sussex, the other the renowned Earl Harold, the favourite of the English king."

"Beshrew me, if I ever saw braver cavaliers; he in the blue and gold armour is little inferior to yourself, and being a lighter man, his horse has great power: his spear has

Digitized by Google

done more deadly work in half an hour's fight than ever mine did in the same time, and I count myself to be no ordinary man."

"He is an admirable champion," said Duke William; "those Saxons are hardy men, and did you see how dexterously he laid about him with that battleaxe he carries? he seemed to break armour like ice; look at that knight lying beneath your horse; his helm and skull are cloven in twain down to the throat, he was charging me full tilt with his lance while I was engaged with another, and Harold struck him as he passed, the axe went into him like a flash of lightning. I think he saved my life, I saw my enemy's point fair upon my visor, but I could not avoid him or parry the blow, I had two strong knights upon me."

"The other knight is no disgrace to the Saxons" said Auvrai, "and the minstrels who attended were valiant men. The sorceress well acted her part as a man, she would not fly, but fought like a devil."

By this time the troops of Normandy had approached very close, and William was joined by Fitz Osborne.

"My liege! it is not good thus to expose your person without cause."

"No chidings, good Fitz Osborne—I am the best judge of that; I'll swear if Anjou slays me, Normandy won't be long without a duke."

"Long enough without a duke like you," returned the favourite; "and therefore, we pray you, run not such risk."

"Not till the next time, be assured my friend, and now halt your troops till we advance and reconnoitre the enemy, who seem well disposed to fight. Give myself and Sir Auvrai fresh horses; but I fear you are wounded," continued he, addressing the knight.

"Not badly; I have lost some blood, yet plenty remains to fight with the Angevins, if I dare, but I am a vassal and must not quit my liege lord in open war; what I have done was to protect the injured, and in that I was warranted, but beyond I cannot go, till I have formally resigned my fealty, and this, with God's blessing, I will now do to that base lord."

So saying, he mounted a fresh horse and galloped towards

Digitized by Google

the Angevin army, followed by his esquire. Approaching the enemy he blew on his horn a note of parley, whereupon an Angevin knight and esquire rode forth to meet him. The Angevin cavalier struck his lance into the ground, raised his visor, and leaving his esquire, advanced unarmed. Sir Auvrai Gigaut did the same, meeting him half-way.

"Sir Benois, I crave protection while I speak with the count of Anjou."

"Granted Sir Auvrai Gigaut!" replied Sir Benois, "follow me in safety—a knight's word is pledged." They then proceeded to the count of Anjou who was on horseback in front of his standard.

"Geoffrey Martel, count of Anjou!" cried Sir Auvrai in a loud voice, "I have sworn fealty but not homage: my oath of fealty debarred not my defending by force and stratagem the honour of a virgin, which was according to my oath of knighthood. I among others pledged my word as a true knight to the minstrels, in order to save your life; yet you trusted the minstrel to the charge of the ruffian Pecquigny, the minister of your reproachful pleasures. He, as you well know, was capable of any base actions. He discovered that the youthful minstrel was a beautiful virgin; he was commander of the town and I had no power to protect her against his machinations but in the way I did. In all this I have acted as a loyal knight: but so far, only as an individual. Now the Norman army and yours are opposed; I cannot join the Norman ranks with-resigning to you my fealty, and the lands which I hold in Anjou by that tenure; they are small, and I give them back. My other lands are in Brittany, in the territory of Neel of Coutances; yet not held in fief of that seigneur, they are free of all subjection, and held in Franc-alieu. Upon God's book I swore fealty for your lands; in God's presence, and that of these knights, I return your lands, and discharge myself from all further fealty to you."

Then addressing the knights, his vassals, who, ignorant of all that had passed, had quitted Domfront with all his men-at-arms according to the orders he had left at the gate and had thus joined the Angevin forces, he cried aloud,—

"Sirs! ye that are from Anjou, I discharge you from

Digitized by Google

your fealty and homage to me; adhere to your count and liege lord! Ye that are from Coutances, take no part in the coming fight; Auvrai Gigaut is not a knight to play a foul part, even to the count of Anjou. Draw off sirs and join your liege lord and mine, Neel count of Coutances, and as he does do ye till after this battle, when I again claim your allegiance. If among you there be young knights who seek deeds of arms, ye are at liberty to take part on either side, even as ye list; but ye do so as single knights, not as my followers, and if it so please the count of Anjou."

"I trust," said the count, "that your whole force will adhere to me as men more true than your recreant self, base Sir Auvrai! whom, if I can capture in the coming fight, I will hang on the walls of Domfront."

"If!" exclaimed Auvrai, in a voice of insult and derision.

"Knights!" cried Anjou in a rage, and turning to the followers of Auvrai, "will you hesitate between this man and the count of Anjou?"

"Not I a moment!" shouted a knight of Coutances who bore Auvrai's banner, and plunging his spurs into his horse's sides galloped forward, vociferating the battle-cry of his chief, which, with a loud shout, was re-echoed by the whole troop of fifteen hundred men.

"Charge the traitors!" cried the count of Anjou, furiously, "charge them!"

His troops wavered for a moment, doubtful how to act, and looking to their respective leaders, most of whom moved not. In that time the others had made a great progress, while Duke William, who had observed a commotion and suspected something of this kind, moved forward rapidly with his whole force.

Geoffrey Martel was an able soldier, and saw if he attacked the retainers of Auvrai, he must engage on his enemy's ground, and in some disorder, so he closed the interval occasioned by the departure of Auvrai's men, and prepared for the fight, for he still far outnumbered the Normans.

We shall now leave them preparing for the combat, and relate what passed in the dungeons of Abbeville, while the events we have been relating took place.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXVI.

Guion is earnest to get rich,
But Frica being a cunning witch,
Persuades him to set Harold free,
Though he's as saucy as he can be.

THE reader is now aware that Ulric was no less a personage than Frica the sorceress in disguise, her skin stained, and she had also stained Editha's with one of those preparations known to these people. Ivar and Kenred were Elstan the huntsman of Alfnoth, and Canute the boatman of Harold; Winifred and Rose, two of Editha's maids brought up in the castle of her father, and resolved to follow her fortunes in weal and woe.

No sooner had Frica left the Conqueror than she proceeded speedily to Abbeville, where she arrived that night, leaving Taillefer and his party concealed in the neighbourhood to abide her return at daybreak. Soon she communicated with Balder, who fortunately was that evening to be on sentry over the prisoners; their arrangements were made, and that night Frica entered the dungeon as before.

"William accepts your offers," said the Vala to Harold, "and has sent me with an order to Guion to liberate you; the Childe can escape with Balder."

"When shall we get away?" asked Harold.

"I shall give the duke's letter to-morrow morning. In the mean time let Alfnoth cut his chains ready to escape with Balder, at mid-day, when the latter can exchange his turn of duty with a comrade and will again be on sentry. I have now no time to lose; Taillefer is hard by."

"Once more let me ask you," said Harold, "who you are, and why do you so interest yourself in our fate?"

"Can neither you nor Alfnoth recognize my features even in this dark dungeon, and still darker disguise?"

"Truly," said the Childe, "I think thy features are familiar to me, and yet I know thee not."

Digitized by Google

"Thou knowest not the Vala of the tower!"

"By Odin!" cried Harold, bursting out into a laugh; "by Odin! but you are a brave dame, and true Norwegian blood. I could kiss you, old dame, but for your beard and male attire."

"Pooh!" said the Vala, not relishing the epithet "old," so lovingly applied by the handsome Saxon, "pooh! don't ye lose our time in nonsense."

"No, no! you are right, my princess of spell and devilry!"

"But tell me," said Alfnoth interrupting him, "how fares my child; is she safe at Bodiam, and well?"

"No Alfnoth! she is not at Bodiam, nor can I say whether she be ill or well."

"The devil!" exclaimed Harold, "where is she then?"

"I will tell thee earl, if thou wilt give me time. Editha was in despair when she heard of her father's capture; she consulted me, and in despite of my remonstrance resolved to accompany me here. She was taken by Pecquigny, but her disguise will defy discovery. I am therefore easy about her; but knowing how you would both suffer, I concealed myself, and her captivity, till I knew your freedom was secure; now you can labour with me for her release wherever she is. I have sent an emissary who, to-morrow, will assuredly bring me some information."

"You did wrong Frica not to tell us," said Harold impatiently, "we should ere this have been with her, and I feel no confidence in your boasted disguise; how can her beauteous features be disguised?"

"By a strong lotion which tinges her skin nearly as deep a copper-colour as the darkest of the human race that are not absolutely black, and which she can remove at pleasure by another preparation in her possession; but all the water of the northern seas could not get it away; so that the deceit can never be detected."

"Not detected! thou devil incarnate! no, but her sex may; and if she were black as thou hast made thine own face, is she not beautiful beyond all the fair in Normandy? By all the Valkyries! but she will be exposed to insult, and none to defend her!"

Digitized by Google

"Nay, prithee chafe not so!" said the Vala somewhat terrified at the fierce expression of Harold's countenance, "she is safe, believe the Vala, who has the means and the will to protect her even if discovered."

"I trust so," said Alfnoth; "but away! and labour for our freedom, for methinks every hour an age, till we get loose of this infernal dungeon."

"I go; Odin and Loke assist us!" So saying, she left the tower, and returned to the wood, where Taillefer and his men awaited her. At daybreak they sallied forth, his trumpet sounding a loud parley to the town, the walls of which were quickly manned when a force of armed men were thus seen to approach; nor would the Vala have been able to enter it so easily the evening before, but for her secret friend within. An armed man now issued from the gate, and demanded who they were, and what they wanted?"

"This minstrel," said Taillefer, "is the bearer of a letter from the illustrious William duke of Normandy, to the Count Guion of Ponthieu; I attend his return with the response."

"Let the messenger follow me sir knight," said the armed man; "but I cannot admit you into the town."

"There is no such admission demanded!" replied Taillefer haughtily, "or it would be asked more promptly, or forced."

"Gently good knight!" returned the other fiercely; "I have seen easier jobs than forcing an entrance into Abbeville."

"Mayhap you have!" retorted his opponent; "and I have seen harder work done by Normans without our sweating."

"Be that as ye will," returned the other; "knock your skull against the walls, if so it please you; perhaps you may make a discovery."

"What may it be, sir brave?"

"That you have brains, sir knight."

"Your advice is good, but I know an easier mode of making the same kind of discovery."

"What's that, good sir giant?"

Digitized by Google

"Why, by knocking yours out instead of my own, sir jackanapes!"

"Come away minstrel," said he of Abbeville, somewhat mistrusting the Norman's wrath, "this good knight chafes at a joke, methinks."

"Your hand friend! it was but a spark."

"All friends," replied the other, giving his hand; and he conducted the minstrel into the presence of the count of Ponthieu.

"Well sir!" said the count, "have you brought your credentials this time, or must I hang you?"

"Most noble count, here is my message," said Frica, presenting the duke of Normandy's letter. The count read it.

"By the mass!" said he, "but yon galliard of Normandy thinks he is king of Europe. Tell him I'll not give him Harold; quit the town in ten minutes, or I'll hang you and Harold too, and send your skins to the tanner's son to make boots of—the insolent, beardless upstart!" The minstrel bowed, too well versed in human nature to stem the torrent in its rage.

"I go most noble count, even as your will directs. The duke, as you wisely observe, is young and impetuous, and I fear will rather be advised by his desire of war, than by the cool counsel of wisdom, which directs the conduct of more experienced chiefs, like yourself." Here the cunning Vala again bowed low and slowly, to gain time without adding to the irritation; then, rising straight, said in a solemn tone,—

"Would it not be more fitting the known dignity and wisdom of the count of Ponthieu to write his answer? as the words of a poor minstrel may not be believed. The fierce Norman may imagine I did not deliver his letter, or the correct response thereto. The letter of the count may do good, and will be authority and defiance; moreover his sage thoughts will best dictate the chastisement due to the proud Norman."

"Get thee hence," said the count, "and await my pleasure; I will converse with thee anon."

The minstrel retired, but hardly had he quitted the apartment, when he was recalled.

Digitized by Google

"Send for Harold" said the chieftain to an attendant. "I will let this Saxon go," continued he to the Vala; "I will not distress my good town of Abbeville by a siege from this hot youth, who, after all, has some good qualities, and with whom I prefer friendship to war."

"I rejoice that your wisdom has so decided," answered the Vala; "and if a poor minstrel, who has insight into future events (a gift which some possess), might offer advice, I would do so, most noble count."

"Art thou a sorcerer then?" said the count anxiously, and in a softened tone.

"Even so!" said Frica.

"Tell me my fate! I will reward thee handsomely."

"I can only cast thy nativity at leisure; at this moment by thy hand I can only guess thy fate."

The count extended his hand.

"'Tis full of events," said the cunning Vala; "they crowd thickly, but I can see but one that is prominent. The duke of Normandy and thy fate go together; if he succeeds thou wilt fall, if he falls thou wilt succeed. Thy ambition dreams of great deeds—thou wilt succeed; William and thou will be rivals."

"What advice dost thou give in the present juncture?" said Guion, in a low tone.

"Art thou so dull, O count of Ponthieu! not to see that William, who, as all men know, aspires to the crown of England, seeks to get Harold to favour his designs; he well knows that Edward wills the crown should go to the Atheling, and he wants the help of Harold to deprive the poor imbecile youth of a throne he cannot fill. Send Harold to him; let them concert their plans about England, and," the Vala whispered, "William will go; if he fails, your star has the ascendancy; if he succeeds, he must rule the fierce Normans by deputy—and how can a deputy rule men whom the duke himself could hardly maintain in subjugation? Bah man! dream not of refusing Harold to William; do more, send me with honour, court him and gain him; even now, in the eleventh hour, you may win him, for he is not vindictive, and will pardon insults received. To resist William now would not be policy, for you are not yet

Digitized by Google

powerful enough, though matchless in political talent; play him like a fish, as you, above all crafty rulers, can best do—he is but a boy, a child in your hands; and when you get him fairly at war with England, then fall upon him and gain all the power and fame which the fates promise to you. When I leave Harold, I will return to you and cast your fortunes with precision."

As the Vala said these words, Harold and Alfnoth arrived.

"Noble earls," said the count of Ponthieu, "I crave your pardon for the insults that have been offered to you, and I now make all the reparation in my power by offering you your freedom without ransom. Your wish has been to go to Normandy; you may proceed there at pleasure, and shall be attended with all honours to the confines of the duchy. And now, in token of our reconciliation, I pray ye, noble earls, to give me your hands."

The two Saxons drew up their persons, and placed their hands behind their backs; Harold exclaiming, in a tone of fierceness and contempt—

"False count, our hands shall never touch thy carcass but armed, and meting out to thee a portion of the vengeance which fills our hearts. We owe thee nothing but hate—we scorn and reject all reconciliation with thee; we owe our freedom to the power of the duke of Normandy, whom we well knew would not and could not endure the insult offered to the greatest subjects of his cousin Edward, king of England. Here then in the presence of thy court, I challenge thee to single combat *à l'outrance* on this day month, at such place and with such arms as may best please thee to fight withal."

"Insolent earl!" retorted the count, "I accept thy challenge willingly."

"Now," said Harold to Alfnoth, as he turned his back to the count of Ponthieu, "now, my friend, let's quit this town and its insolent master."

"Stop a moment," said Alfnoth aloud; "I claim the right of casting lots for priority in the trial by arms with the count of Ponthieu."

Digitized by Google

"No" returned Harold; "I first suffered the insult, and have the first right to vengeance."

"Both at once!" cried Ponthieu, "and double your numbers to boot. Are there not three knights in this presence who will meet those Saxon insolents as my companions?"

"Yes" cried several knights at once; and the count, choosing three, said tauntingly,

"Pick the knights of Normandy for your companions, and meet us where you please."

"Be it so," said Alfnoth; then, led by the minstrel and followed by a crowd of armed men and knights, the noble Saxons quitted the town on foot.

The count of Ponthieu's ambition made him soon recover his temper, and he ordered caparisoned horses to be sent to Harold and Alfnoth; and the hawk of the former, which by the compassion of some among the attendants had been spared without the knowledge of the count, was returned to him. The noble bird, fearing a second separation, positively refused to take its usual position on his wrist, and instead of its head being turned from him, ready for flight, it turned towards him, and seemingly conscious of their mutual degradation, crept up his arm to perch on his shoulder, playfully pecking at his beard. He now joined Taillefer, just as the horses arrived, together with all those attendants that were made prisoners with him. Neither Harold nor Alfnoth would mount the count's horses, and Taillefer and an attendant knight gave theirs to the Saxon chiefs, themselves mounting those of the traitorous count of Ponthieu, who now appeared. Attended by a strong body of men-at-arms, and heading the party, Guion conducted it to the château of Eu, where William, who had come on horseback to receive Harold, gave a furious reception to the count of Ponthieu, threatening to ravage his country if he again gave him cause of offence.

"I slew your brother Ingelran, sir count," said the duke of Normandy; "and if I have again cause to grieve at your disloyal deeds, by the splendour of God! I will slay you also."

"I crave battle against the false count of Ponthieu," said

Digitized by Google

Harold, "for disloyal treatment; and with your sanction, most noble duke of Normandy, so it shall be."

"And I accept your challenge," replied Guion.

"Then let it be so, when I have leisure to attend," answered William; "till then I forbid the combat. Most noble Earl Harold, welcome to Normandy! and now let us journey towards Rouen."

So saying they turned their horses from the count, whom they left unnoticed; he rapidly turned also to avoid the degraded position in which the arrogant manner of the duke of Normandy had placed him. The two parties thus separated, and William, accompanied by the Saxon chiefs, proceeded to Rouen.

The duke now heard of the active operations of the count of Anjou, which compelled him to go to the frontier, accompanied by the Saxon chiefs, who were burning with impatience to free Editha from thraldom. William presented Harold and his companion with two beautiful suits of armour, inviting them to attend him on his expedition; and when they accepted the invitation, they confided to him, and the Lady Matilda, all the particulars relative to Editha.

The gentle heart of the duchess made her condemn the conduct of Editha for not having intrusted her with the secret of the disguise; but at the same time she was obliged to acknowledge that, as the policy of her husband was at that time doubtful, the prudence of Editha completely justified her silence and want of confidence. Upon the young and chivalrous duke of Normandy, the recollection of Editha's beauty, and her romantic conduct in attempting to release her father, made a lively impression, and he burned with all the ardour of a youthful knight to enlist in the cause of captive beauty. All were quickly ready to proceed upon their expedition against Anjou. But during their preparations, Alfnoth and Harold had despatched Frica to Domfront, and she had there arranged with Auvrai Gigaut the plan of escape which has been recounted.

The duke having resolved upon the investment of Domfront, it so fell out that Editha was released the same day; thus William's troops were at hand to succour the fugitives.

On the march however, the duke, Harold, and Alfnoth,

Digitized by Google

being impatient, had advanced far beyond the column to meet their friends; and at a distance descried the flight of the party from Domfront, which enabled them to arrive in time to rescue the weaker party, as has been related.

CHAPTER XXVII.

At Domfront Geoffrey won't try a fight,
He runs away in all men's sight,
Yet soon comes back with another host,
And delivers battle to his cost.
The Alençons offer raw skins to sell,
For which Duke William tans them well.

When the count of Anjou saw the Norman forces advance, his first idea was to abide their attack, with the fortified town of Domfront in his rear; but having observed the hesitation of his own troops when he ordered them to attack the deserters from his standard, he became alarmed as to the result of the contest. It was true that his own troops far outnumbered those of his opponent, but he dreaded the personal prowess of the Norman duke, and Auvrai Gigaut, who was one of the most terrible champions of his time; and he had observed with astonishment the resistless bearing of one of the stranger knights, whose dreadful battle-axe no armour seemed to resist. Now all men know that three such knights will put whole squadrons of ordinary men to flight. Boy! said Sir William, drawing himself up, his aged face sparkling with animation—when the Conqueror charged, his sword fell upon common men as the flail falls upon the broken straw; when he thundered in the battle, the vulgar crowd huddled upon each other to avoid his blows, rather than thought how to resist them. O! it was a glorious sight to see him opening lanes through hosts of armed men! The count of Anjou felt the moral superiority which three such leaders gave to the Norman troops, and his balancing mind was quickly decided by a herald, who advanced, bearing a challenge to single combat, offered by Duke

Digitized by Google

William, by Gigaut, and by Harold. It was left to the count to choose which of the three he would meet, and the terms of the combat were that the army of the defeated champion should retire for twenty days from before the town of Domfront, and not approach within five leagues of the walls. The count did not hesitate a moment to refuse the combat.

"Go to your master," exclaimed he to the herald, "and tell him that I reject all single encounters; I am too old a commander to throw away the advantage of numbers."

This answer to the challenge was dictated by a regard to his personal safety—he feared to try his strength with any of these knights; and as he well knew that by refusing the challenge he had added to the moral inferiority of his troops, he at once determined to retreat, and not risk the result of a collision with the Norman army. He therefore ordered his squadrons to wheel round and retired towards Domfront, followed leisurely by the duke of Normandy. Throwing a reinforcement into the town, he abandoned it to its fate. William then invested it, and pushed the siege with vigour; but the events are not so remarkable as to demand a particular description. At length the town resolved to capitulate.

The day the townsmen gave signs of surrender, the duke heard that Geoffrey Martel had arrived with his army to relieve the garrison, and was encamped hard by. He immediately called William the son of Fitz Osborne, Roger de Montgomery, and William the son of Thierry.

"Go find the count of Anjou" said he; "tell him from me that I hear he brings provisions for the garrison of Domfront. I guard the gates, and to-morrow will await his coming to receive him."

The three knights immediately departed, and on arriving at the Angevins' advanced post sounded a parley; they were conducted to the tent of the count, and Montgomery delivered to him the message of the duke of Normandy, word for word.

"Tell Duke William that to-morrow at daybreak I will be mounted on a white horse, ready to meet him in single combat at the gates of Domfront, through which I will

Digitized by Google

enter in despite of him; and in order that he may recognize me without difficulty, I will bear a shield of gold without any device."

To this speech Roger de Montgomery replied,

"Sire, do not take the trouble to go to Domfront, for tomorrow at the point of day the duke will come to this place mounted on a bay charger with a red shield; and that you may recognize him he will have at the end of his lance a flag of silk with which he will wipe your face."

On saying these words the knights turned their horses' heads, rode away to the duke's camp, and gave him an account of their embassy. All waited for the coming day with impatience, expecting high deeds of arms would be done: but, as the count of Anjou marshalled his troops, two knights came full gallop to his camp, and informed him that Domfront had surrendered. On receiving this news he drew off his army and marched to Hambières, where he waited to give battle to the duke.

William having assembled all his forces at Domfront pursued the count, who had concealed his army in ambush among woods bordering the road by which William was expected to march.

"Methinks," said Martel to his friend, the count of Mans-Hélie, "that when the army of William has half of it passed that angle of the road we will fall upon the other half unexpectedly, and his leading squadrons, knowing that Neel of Coutances is hard by, expecting to join them before they attack me, will be induced to form their lines to their front when they hear the attack upon the rear, for they will be anxious to keep their communication open with the count of Coutances. This will prevent William from leading them back to support the rear of his column, at the head of which he will place his own person: thus we shall have to do with but half his army in the beginning of the fight. Let fifty Angevin lances keep aloof till they perceive where the Norman duke fights in person, and then let them fall upon him together. If we can but slay him, and have the first half-hour to deal with half his army against the whole of our force, the battle will probably go in our favour, and the leading squadrons, when they are formed and bear down to

Digitized by Google

support their rear, will probably be thrown into confusion by the fugitives."

"The plan of attack is good, most noble count!" answered the count of Mans-Hélie, "and is particularly favoured by the headlong courage of the young duke, who is always seeking opportunities to engage in single combat, that he may exhibit his Herculean strength. But my lord, he has as much of the fox in him as of the lion, and I pray you sire to be cautious: recollect that you are between two devils incarnate; for Neel of Coutances is a consummate warrior, and when two such men lay their heads together, we shall have more blows than faults to deal with."

"By the mass! but there they are!" cried Anjou, pointing from the place of their concealment to where the road passed over a small hill, about half a mile distant. "Now is the hour in which Fate shall decide between William and myself."

Scarcely had the words passed his lips when the Norman chivalry began forming their lines on the head of their column, which halted; but their infantry continued advancing towards the wood, extending their front as they came on.

"Your ambuscade is discovered, count!" said Mans-Hélie, "the duke has sent forward no *éclaireurs*, nor has he any that I can perceive; on crossing the rise he at once forms order of battle. What we took for his van is his main body. His armed men on foot will be upon your ambuscade in ten minutes."

"It signifies not," replied Anjou. "I will lead our own infantry to the encounter in the wood, while you go to our cavalry, which are concealed by the high trees; let them break from their cover, and sweeping round into the open plain charge the flank of the Normans by successive squadrons, and in full career."

Suddenly the war-cry of "Neel of Coutances!" was heard from the opposite side, ringing through the wood, and the "St. Sever! St. Sever!" of the Cotentins was answered by the battle-shout of Anjou.

"By heavens! we are surrounded," cried the count, in dismay, and he rode through the ranks of his followers,

Digitized by Google

exhorting them to the most desperate exertion as the only means of escape.

In fact, William had discovered the intention of the count of Anjou to surprise him on his march, and also the place where the ambuscade was to be placed; he had therefore combined movements with Neel of Coutances, and had completely succeeded in surprising the ambuscaded army of Anjou.

The battle of Hambières now raged in every part of the field. Harold, who commanded the left wing of the Norman army, seeing the Angevins trying to gain the road leading to their own frontier, charged them furiously, and there the brunt of the battle raged. The desperate Angevins fought bravely, and their count animating them to a decided attack, was met hand to hand by Harold. The count having his spear in rest, charged with great violence, but the lance of the Saxon earl had been broken early in the combat, and he now fought with that ruthless battle-axe which he, above all the Saxon race, wielded with resistless force and dexterity. Meeting Martel half-way he struck off at a blow the head of the Angevin lance, and received the truncheon on his breast; the shock was severe, horse and man were staggered, but the knights passed each other, and then wheeled round to renew the charge. The whole army beheld the fight, and, as if by consent, stopped the general action to contemplate the strife of these two men. It was with pain and impatience that Duke William beheld his enemy opposed singly to Harold, and with the advantage of the lance against the battle-axe, for Anjou was among the best spearmen in France; but when he saw Harold lop off the point in full career, he knew the advantage was less than he at first imagined; still he could scarcely bear to see Anjou in any hands but his own. The contending champions again ran upon each other—Harold with his battle-axe and Anjou with his well-tempered sword.

"Your sword! your sword! Earl Harold! or he will slay thee!" cried a hundred voices; but he heeded them not, and the two hostile knights closed. As Harold raised his axe to strike, the adroit count of Anjou made a thrust under the raised arm of his opponent; it broke the joining of the

Digitized by Google

armour, and pierced the body of the Saxon, whose blow thus fell with diminished, although staggering force, upon the helm of his enemy. Anjou was scarcely able to keep his seat; but a cry of exultation arose among the Angevins, for all saw that Harold was deeply wounded. Lightly they again turned their horses, and Harold, adroitly parrying the count's thrust with his left hand, struck full upon his enemy's shoulders, and cutting through his armour wounded him so deeply that he fell to the earth. A shout and a charge from both sides followed. The Angevin army was defeated and fled in confusion, carrying with them their wounded chief, and leaving half of their numbers dead upon the field.

So ended the fight of Hambières, being the second battle in which the duke of Normandy was victorious while yet a youth, besides numerous engagements of lesser note, sieges, and single combats.

There remained now nothing to oppose the victorious chief but the town of Alençon, which he immediately laid siege to, closely beleaguering it around with towers from which he cast all sorts of projectiles with arbalists and other warlike instruments of the time.

Whenever he rode round the walls of the town, the inhabitants hung out tanned hides, shouting, "La Pel! La Pel! à la Pel!" in ridicule of his birth—his mother being the daughter of a fell-monger. This not only enraged William himself, but all the men of Falaise that were in his army, and they resolved to avenge the insult. One day, having repelled a sortie made by the townsmen from a *tête-du-pont* which they had formed to cover the passage of the river, he perceived that he could easily fill the ditch which surrounded this fort. Wherefore, collecting an immense quantity of dry wood, and loading the whole of his troops, he penetrated between the fort and the bridge and filled up the ditch in every part with dry wood; this he set fire to, and the fort being extremely small, and great quantities of wood having been used in its construction, the defenders were surrounded with fire, while on the other side of the raging element the shouting Normans stood with their sharp swords, no less merciless than the flames.

Digitized by Google

The unfortunate Angevins, unable to endure the scorching heat, sought to force a desperate passage, through fire and Normans, down to the river, whose waters glided on as if mocking their misery. In vain did the half-roasted garrison throw themselves upon their enemies with desperate valour; the latter, animated by their furious duke, cast them back upon the terrible death from which they sought to escape, and all were destroyed except twenty unfortunate prisoners. These the Norman duke commanded to be brought before him, and sending for an Angevin prisoner taken at Hambières he desired the man to observe what passed, and then ordered the feet and hands of the twenty prisoners to be cut off and their eyes to be put out.

"By the splendour of God!" cried he to the prisoner whom he had sent for, "I swore when I saw yon villains shake and kick their tanned hides at me, I would leave them neither feet to kick with, hands to strike, nor eyes to see. Now get ye to yon town, tell them what ye have seen, and that if before night they do not surrender, I will carry their walls by assault, and every living male shall suffer the same punishment as you have seen inflicted upon your companions. Away with you, caitiff! I will give you two minutes to run, and at the end of that time, a dozen bowmen shall send their arrows after thee. Fly dog, and run for your life!"

Away went the soldier with all the speed of fear, while shouts and laughter from the troops were answered by cries from the walls. A dozen bows were quickly bent, and at the end of the time appointed, flying darts were sped whizzing through the air after him; in vain—the racer had passed their range, and as the arrows fell short, the exulting cries of his countrymen on the walls assured him of his safety and he entered the town.

"Now," said Duke William fiercely, as he turned from the scene towards his followers, "cast those fellows' hands and feet from the engines on our nearest tower into the town, that they may know my messenger tells truth."

I cannot, said Sir William Mallet to his amanuensis,—I cannot altogether approve of this cruel treatment which the noble duke inflicted upon his prisoners: but in truth

Digitized by Google

they had greatly irritated his feelings, and when his grace's rage was roused he was as ruthless as the fiercest tiger; but he was not cruelly disposed without great provocation.

On this occasion it appeared to be very politic: the townsmen, terrified by the example, surrendered that evening to the great joy of the troops, for the common men-at-arms, as well as many of our knights, did not keep pace with the youthful ardour of their duke, and greatly wished to retire to their homes, to comfort their wives and families with the plunder they had collected in the war. The duke, therefore, having left a garrison in Alençon, retired to his favourite town of Falaise, where he disbanded his army, and soon after repaired to Rouen.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Guion of Ponthieu now is shent,
Which gives Duke William great content.

HERE every preparation was made for the approaching combat between Harold and the count of Ponthieu.

On the day appointed for the fight, the lists were laid out by the heralds-at-arms. These lists were one hundred yards in length and forty in breadth, and at each side benches were raised in the form of steps for the accommodation of spectators. All the windows and tops of the houses, from which a view of the combat could be obtained, were crowded with people. On each side of the centre lists were two large pavilions fronting each other, and in the one sat the duke of Normandy with the judges of the combat, who were selected in equal numbers from the knights of Rouen and Abbeville. It was agreed upon, that in case of any dispute arising between the judges, if the numbers should be equal on each side, the duke of Normandy should have the casting vote; otherwise, he was not to interfere, unless he chose to throw down his warder and forbid the continuation of the battle. In the other pavilion were seated all

Digitized by Google

the ladies of the court of Rouen; the Duchess Matilda and the Lady Editha being in the centre of the front rank. On the head of the duchess was a small golden coronet, set with brilliants; her beautiful hair flowed loosely over her shoulders; a gold chain round her neck was entwined with a pearl necklace of great value. A close-fitting boddice, rich in jewellery, displayed her small waist. Over this she wore a loose robe lined with ermine, and her hand bore a sceptre.

On her right was Editha, with her richly braided hair; she was dressed in the Saxon style, but without the usual ornaments of her rank, except two golden clasps which drew up the short sleeves of her robe in festoons towards the shoulders. Both these beauteous dames were pale, and it was evident they were present only in accordance with propriety, the respect due to their high rank and the courage of the combatants.

"Keep up your spirit, dear lady," said the duchess, as they seated themselves on two large carved high-backed oaken chairs, which were provided for their accommodation, and distinguished them from the rest of the company.

"Verily, most kind Lady Matilda, I do confide in the God of battle, and in the justice of my father's and Earl Harold's cause; and I pray God my courage may not fail while I behold the combat."

As she said this a trumpet announced that the duke and the judges had taken their seats. He was crowned with the ducal coronet, and round his neck was thrown a massive chain of gold. He wore a white tunic, richly ornamented with lace, which reached half-way down his thigh, and over his broad shoulders a dark purple velvet robe, striped with embroidery and lined with white fur. Close-fitting hose, gartered below the knee, displayed the form of his gigantic limbs. In his hand was the ducal sceptre. His seat was slightly raised above those on which the judges sat on either hand, and thus displaying his great size he seemed the giant he really was. At a signal made with his sceptre, the clangours of the rival trumpets were heard from each end of the lists. Then the heart of Editha sunk, and her beautiful hands were clasped with fearful energy; but she evinced no other sign of emotion, and her eyes were fixed on that

Digitized by Google

end of the lists at which the count of Ponthieu was expected to enter. Matilda was also pale and agitated; she felt deeply for her companion, and gently placed her hand upon the arm of Editha,—it was icy cold!

The champions now entered, four on each side; they rode up the lists and halted at about twenty yards from each other. The herald-at-arms made them declare that they had no concealed arms, and when the forms of chivalry had been observed, they wheeled round, returned to their places at the extremities of the lists, and again faced each other. Harold was opposed to the count of Ponthieu; his firm figure, broad chest, and powerful horse, made him appear what he was, a terrible champion to deal with. He held his lance in his hand, his shield was hung from his neck, his curtle-axe swung from his wrist, to which it was attached by a short chain; he wore no sword, but a dagger of mercy was stuck in his girdle.

The count of Ponthieu was armed in like manner, yet wearing a sword in place of a battle-axe, which on that day was only carried by the Saxons. With Guion were three knights of Abbeville, huge of stature. With Harold and Alfnoth stood I, William Mallet—boy Wace; for I was wroth at the traitorous count's conduct to my good host, the Childe of Sussex, and I was angered that the lovely Lady Editha should be so vexed by the recreant; moreover I had much friendship for Harold. On that day boy, I carried my iron mace at my saddle-bow in case of need. With us there stood a good Norman knight, named Gaston. The trumpet sounded, and the master-at-arms cried with a loud voice, "Knights! *Laissez aller!* and God defend the right!"

The shock was great, for we were all wroth and full of mighty despite against each other. Our shivered lances flew sparkling up in splinters; our horses staggered, mine and my adversary's both fell. Alfnoth was thrown, horse and man, to the ground, badly hurt, and his opponent passed over him unhurt. The Lady Editha screamed aloud and fell back in her chair. But her father was again on his feet; his enemy, turning, rode on him, sword in hand, yet the Childe stood firm and a desperate combat ensued.

Meantime Harold, striking Guion full on the helm,

Digitized by Google

forced him back over the crupper of his horse, and then called upon him to remount, at which a loud shout of approbation rung through the crowd. While Guion regained his horse Harold seized his curtle-axe, and as he passed the knight who was engaged with Alfnoth, he gave the former a back-handed blow, which tumbled him from the saddle; but sternly and strongly he rose again and, engaging the Childe on foot, felled him to the ground; then putting his foot on Alfnoth's neck, said, "Yield thee, or die!" "I yield not!" cried Alfnoth, making a vain effort to rise; but the knight raising his sword, struck him a blow that stretched him senseless on the ground. Harold, seeing Alfnoth's danger, had left the count to assist his friend, and Guion, taking this for flight, followed with a shout of triumph. The Norman knight Gaston had meanwhile been overthrown and was senseless; his enemy thinking him dead, also fell upon Harold, who was thus assailed by two, for I had a powerful man to deal with and never was so straitened.

Harold put forth all his great agility; bounding like a tiger, he contrived always to keep one assailant between him and the other opponent. At last he struck the Abbeville knight so heavy a blow with his axe that he almost buried it in his body, and then springing upon Guion he clasped him in his arms and dashed him to the ground. "Caitiff!" cried he; "I will not slay thee with my noble battle-axe; thou shalt not die like a warrior, but as an assassin ought to die. Choke, dog! choke!" and fiercely he grappled the throat of the count of Ponthieu, whose dying struggles were fearful to behold; he writhed and twisted under the knee and iron grasp of the Saxon, but all in vain. I had slain my antagonist with my steel mace, and beheld the last struggles of the count of Ponthieu: his spurred heels dug into the earth, his convulsive hands could gain no fixed hold on the armour of Harold, over which they passed impotently, seeking in vain to make some clutch, his body twisted like a serpent. All was fruitless, and each moment his struggles grew weaker. There was now a dead, a horror-struck silence, a breathless silence, only broken by the rattling armour of the dying count as his efforts

Digitized by Google

brought it in collision with the steel-clad Harold: no other sound was audible.

"Save him!" cried a few voices from among the crowd, "great duke spare the conquered count; throw down thy warder in the name of the Holy Virgin!"

"No by the splendour of God! I will not save him," said William in a voice of thunder.

"This for thy treason! this for the dungeons of Abbeville!" cried Harold, as he let go his grasp of the now senseless count, and seizing him by the feet with mighty strength, swung him high in air, and then dashed his large carcass to the earth. An expiring sound came from the body as it fell heavily, and with a horrible crash upon the lists; the limbs straightened and quivered, a priest hurried towards the dying man with upraised crucifix, but the wicked soul had departed.

"So perish unshrived traitors!" exclaimed Harold to the spectators, as with a haughty air he pointed to the slain man. Thus the combat ended, amidst the acclamations of the people. Then followed much feasting and rejoicing at Rouen, for Duke William did high honour to Earl Harold, whom he sought by all means to win to his interests in furtherance of the plan which induced him to release him from the dungeons of Abbeville

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIX.

The French king's hundred thousand men
Advance, but do not all come back again,
They find the Normans good at strokes,
And Taillefer's verses very bad jokes.

NORMANDY was now tranquil, and Harold and Alfnoth would have taken their departure, when suddenly the duke heard that the king of France had formed a league against him, and was on the point of entering Normandy at the head of a hundred thousand men. This terrible coalition, consisting of most of the great chiefs of France, marched under their sovereign to Mantes, where he divided his army, sending half with his brother, the Count Eudes, into the Pays-de-Caux. The duke repaired with the mass of his forces to Evreux, but sent a large detachment, under the count of Longueville, to cover his capital, and check the march of Count Eudes, while William contented himself with cutting off the supplies of the royal army, without venturing to engage its overwhelming force in a pitched battle. This gave rise to innumerable petty combats, in all of which Duke William and Earl Harold emulated each other in deeds of arms: nor was it easy for the army to decide which was superior to the other; for the great agility and hardihood of the Saxon chief seemed to compensate for his inferiority in stature and muscular force to the Norman duke; it was however generally supposed that the latter was a superior knight, and that if they were personally opposed in single combat, it would terminate in favour of the Norman. In their moral qualities, their political and military genius, they appeared to be alike —both great, both cautious, yet enterprising and well understanding the great principles of war. Both were severe, when events called for severity; but in the Norman

Digitized by Google

chief it amounted to cruelty, and was perhaps in some degree tainted by avarice: this, possibly, arose from the scarcity of means in his possession when compared with the greatness of his enterprises, and was not altogether natural to his character. Harold was generous and forgiving. They were both great men, but fortune was on the side of William.

Count de Longueville, being in the Pays-de-Caux, heard that the king of France's brother, Count Eudes, was encamped at Mortemer, and carelessly guarded, believing the whole of William's forces were assembled at Evreux. This intelligence decided Longueville to attack the enemy by surprise, and he accordingly fell upon him at Mortemer-en-Lions. The victory was decisive on the side of the Normans. Of forty thousand men that composed the king's army, thirty thousand were destroyed or made prisoners. The great slaughter of the battle took place about the village of D'Ecouys, which from that time has been called the village of Coupegueule. Immense booty, consisting of arms, horses, and baggage, was there taken, and the whole army became enriched.

No sooner had the slaughter ceased, than Raoul de Tesson, covered with blood and sweat from the fight, springing on a fresh horse turned his head toward Evreux, and never drew bridle till he reached his master the duke.

"My liege!" said he, leaping from his tired horse, "your army under the count de Longueville has defeated the French army under Count Eudes: thirty thousand have been killed or made prisoners."

"By the splendour of God!" exclaimed William; "but this is good news for my brother of France; get me four active peasants to carry it to him quickly; for, like a true and faithful vassal of the crown of France, I will not defer the happiness of my king-lord. And thou Taillefer, thou art a rhymer; put the news into thine own jingle, that his majesty and his court may take more pleasure therein."

"Our couriers will arrive in the French camp by midnight I think," said Taillefer to the duke, as the jovial

Digitized by Google

esquire returned with the following verses, which he presented to his master :—

> "Reveillez-vous, et vous levez !
> Guerriers ! qui trop dormi avez ;
> Allez bientôt voir vos amis,
> Que les Normands ont à mort mis,
> Entre Ecouys et Mortemer ;
> Là vous convient les inhumer."

"Excellent verses by the mass!" exclaimed William, laughing; "can you run fast dogs?" continued he, turning to some peasants.

"Like greyhounds."

"You'll even want all your speed," quoth William, "an ye do my bidding faithfully. Steal into the French camp before the morrow dawns; pin these verses on the king's tent, and in different quarters of the camp; sing them aloud; raise a shout; and then, ye caitiffs, use your best legs, for you will well need them; but the darkness will save ye from the arrows which perchance may be sent after ye in thanks for your news. If ye do your business well, I will give each of ye ten golden bezants for your trouble."

Away the peasants started, and ere the day dawned four strong and sonorous voices were heard to chaunt aloud :—

> "Reveillez-vous, et vous levez !
> Guerriers ! qui trop dormi avez ;
> Allez bientôt voir vos amis,
> Que les Normands ont à mort mis,
> Entre Ecouys et Mortemer ;
> Là vous convient les inhumer."

> "Awaken all, and seize your spears,
> Your friends with Eudes are all in tears ;
> Warriors ! while thus you idly lie,
> At Mortemer your comrades die !
> Thousands there stretched upon the plain,
> Unburied wait the funeral train !"

The confusion and alarm was general; the choristers fled, and day had scarcely broke when the count of Eudes arrived in the French camp, himself and his horse, to whose swift-

Digitized by Google

ness he owed his escape from the carnage. The panic became general; every man of the French army packed up his baggage in haste; and, reckless of orders, the whole host fled to the French frontier.

The king of France, terrified at his discomfiture, immediately concluded a peace with Duke William, by which the latter gained some important castles, and a considerable territory. The count of Anjou, who had joined his forces to those of the king of France, marched from Mantes into Anjou, and endeavoured to surprise the castle of Ambrières, but Duke William foreseeing his intention, sent a strong force under William Fitz Osborne, who, by forced marches, threw themselves into the place; and when Anjou arrived, assisted by the viscounts of Thouars and Chartres, he was foiled with great loss.

When Duke William heard that Ambrières was beleaguered, he marched to its relief at the head of thirty thousand men, defeated the combined armies of Anjou, Thouars, and Chartres, in many encounters, and conquered the whole of the province of Maine. But the indomitable Martel formed a new coalition, assembled a hundred thousand men at the sources of the river Orne, and determined to march along the banks of that river, and penetrate into Normandy. Duke William was unable to meet this overwhelming force in the field; he therefore sent orders to all the Norman garrisons to resist to the last and, wherever opportunity offered to sally forth and harass the enemy. Meanwhile he shut himself up with all his disposable forces in his favourite town of Falaise, which was his retreat in all critical times; and it was to cover this town that he had, in the preceding campaign with the king of France, marched with the main body of his troops to Evreux. In the present campaign, he knew that by maintaining a defensive war, the immense army now opposed to him would spread itself over the country in search of plunder, which, when accumulated, would produce quarrels among the leaders, causing great numbers of their troops to disband themselves and retire to their homes; while the headlong count of Anjou would probably find himself compromised in the interior of Normandy.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXX.

Obstinate dukes are not always right,
And Sir Auvrai is put to much despite;
Geoffrey of Anjou jokes without reason,
But finds his best are not in season.

WILLIAM, finding himself attacked by such an enormous force, called Matilda with her court to Falaise. Accompanied by Editha, the Vala, and Alfnoth, who was still ill from his wounds, she proceeded by slow journeys.

On the second day they perceived some strange horsemen, whose appearance was suspicious, and gave great uneasiness to Sir Auvrai Gigaut. He had undertaken the command of the escort which William sent to convoy the duchess. The fears of Sir Auvrai soon proved well founded. The moment the scouts discovered the unknown riders, he attempted to conceal his party in the wood till he could ascertain who the strangers were.

"I did not like this attempt," said he to Elstan and Canute; "but Duke William insisted upon our trying it, and asserted that there could be no danger as yet."

"And Earl Harold sent me to the Childe," replied Canute, "to beg that he would take the Lady Editha to England at once, for like you, sir knight, he greatly feared this journey; but my lord and the Lady Editha wished to be near the earl, and were of one mind to accompany the duchess."

"By the mass! I fear me we shall scarcely reach Falaise. These strangers have seen us; and I ween they have many whom we cannot yet discover."

As Sir Auvrai said this a large body of the enemy appeared in front, while another issuing from behind a height far away to the right, rode upon the only way by which a retreat was practicable. Sir Auvrai put his escort

Digitized by Google

in due order of battle, and resolved to force a passage through the enemy, if possible.

"By the powers of Odin! I will disguise myself," said the Vala, "and thus serve ye better than in fight. O Loke! god of deceits! assist me in these straits." Saying this she leapt from her horse, tied up the reins, and let it gallop away over the downs.

"Get ye hence! let none catch thee, they pursue higher game, and at night I may find thee again."

As she said these words she went up to the ladies and kissed both their hands.

"Think not, dear ladies, that the Vala abandons ye through fear. Little does she heed life. Adieu! May the gods of Asgaard protect ye!"

Frica tightened the belts of a small wallet which she always carried on her back, and then disappeared.

"That is a daring and shrewd spirit," said Auvrai.

"Yes," replied Canute, "and I hope she may escape."

"God has given us brave hearts, strong arms, good armour, and sharp lances, my comrades," shouted Sir Auvrai, turning to his men; "show yourselves worthy gentlemen-at-arms, and we shall smite these dogs hip and thigh. You, Canute and Elstan, strike not a blow but in defence of the ladies; keep at their sides, and give yourselves wholly to their protection; if ye can burst through, fly with them and heed not us. We will maintain the fight as we best can."

"Even as you direct so will we do, noble sir," answered the Saxon.

"I leave you in the hands of your two Saxons, fair ladies; but think not that Auvrai Gigaut's good lance will be far from you. I hold myself your first and best guard; but events may so fall out that your escape may be made under shelter of my battle; besides, I may fall, for who can enter the combat and say *he may not die?* And now let us advance."

The party accordingly proceeded gently; Sir Auvrai so guiding them on the downs, that they got their backs to the sun to favour their charge just as they reached the enemy, who now showed themselves Angevins.

Sir Auvrai halted on the crest of a rising ground, till the

Digitized by Google

enemy were near, and as they mounted the hill he charged furiously against them. The combat was long and desperate, for the extraordinary force of Sir Auvrai seemed superhuman; but in vain did he open a passage through the enemy, they closed behind him and forced him to turn back to free Elstan and Canute, on whom the foe pressed. Thus, after prodigies of strength and valour, in which his followers well seconded him, they were unable to force a passage, and the horse of Sir Auvrai fell exhausted with wounds and exertion. Alfnoth, who had promised Editha to remain with her, now mounted a steed, in despite of all remonstrances, and quickly fell exhausted. Editha leaped from her horse and placed herself at his side, and Matilda followed her example.

"Fly Matilda, fly!" cried Editha; "your capture will be ruin to your husband. Fly, for all our sakes!"

"Yes, fly!" said Auvrai.

"I believe you are right," replied Matilda: "I will do as ye desire; but I see no means of escape." Saying this she again sprung upon her palfrey.

"Keep close behind me" said Auvrai, as he dismounted and with his flashing sword smote back his foes.

The terrified Matilda pressed close upon his track; her horse snorted in the knight's neck; at last unexpectedly it trod upon his spur, the sudden check crossed his legs and he fell. Instantly many men threw themselves upon him, and, crushed under the weight of numbers, he was made prisoner desperately wounded, he alone having for some minutes contended with the enemy, all the rest were killed or taken.

"Surrender! rescue or no rescue!" cried many voices.

The knight looked round. The fight was over. Matilda and Editha were prisoners with his whole convoy.

"O William of Normandy what hast thou done?" cried Auvrai, mad with rage—"Surrender! no, dogs of Anjou!" Saying this, he made a desperate exertion, regained his feet, cleared a circle round him, and then sprung at those who surrounded the female prisoners; but ere he could reach them, he swooned from loss of blood and the battle ended. Auvrai was bound and laid across a horse, apparently lifeless.

The victors were then joined by the other party, which

Digitized by Google

had closed in, and with them a querulous old man, who was much cut and bloody. He complained loudly of having been robbed and maltreated by the party of Sir Auvrai, and demanded some reparation for the wrongs he had suffered, especially from Elstan and Canute, whom when he saw, he swore had taken money from him, at which those Saxons were greatly indignant. However, he minutely described the purses and money they had pillaged from him, and the commander of the party ordered them to be searched.

"By Odin," said Elstan, "the old knave is a liar! I never saw his face before; and as to plunder, sir knight, your own men have taken all we had. That soldier took my purse, but it was mine own, and not that old caitiff's, as he says it was; and how, in the name of the devil, he could describe it I know not."

"I care not whether it be his or yours," exclaimed the soldier, "it is mine now, and what my sword wins my sword keeps."

"Thou sayest well brave Hubert!" answered their leader, Count Ernauld; "'twere a good joke, by the mass, for us to ride through the country and answer for the pillage committed by these knaves of Duke William; and not even Norman knaves, but Saxon dogs that he lets loose to ill-treat and plunder poor old men like this!"

"Well then, give me back my money good sir knight," said the complaining old man.

"No my good friend; those vagabonds robbed you; that I am sorry for, and only that we want prisoners, I would hang them for you; but what we have found upon them is ours by right of conquest; in short, he says the purse is his, you say it is yours—we are too polite to call either of you liars, but hold you both to be most excellent and honourable men, so we will keep the money till you settle the dispute between you; for my part I strongly advise you to go to the courts of justice at Rouen or to Falaise. Here we have the duchess; she will no doubt send a message to the duke to do you justice!'

Here the Angevin troops laughed at the joke of their chief.

Digitized by Google

"I will even do as you say sir knight; and go to the duke, for he is a just man and will pay me for the wrong done by his train; indeed lady your men have ill-used me," said the poor old man, "and I would fain have justice."

"Hie thee to the duke, and welcome," cried Elstan, "and when thou seest him, tell him if he pays thee he may; but by Odin I will not serve him if I am to be brought up to answer for taking a purse from a cursed old Angevin rascal like thee; for I don't care if I own the truth—I did take thy purse, old greybeard. Get thee therefore to Duke William, and tell him that this good knight treats his soldiers better. For my part I am a Saxon; Norman or Angevin is alike to me; I would serve with ye, brave sirs, but for my master Earl Harold, who is with William."

The old man cast a furtive look upon them all, and then, abusing the Duchess Matilda, Editha, and the whole Norman party, he passed on towards Falaise.

The party now proceeded, and having ravaged the country round, reached the count of Anjou's quarters, where the news of this rich booty had arrived before them, and they were met by the count.

"Welcome fair dames!" and he saluted them ironically; "this visit is equally unexpected and agreeable. Ye see the difference between husbands and lovers: Duke William sent ye with a slight escort, exposed to all the dangers of a wild soldiery, but I carefully sent a strong escort to protect ye!"

The trembling captives were unable to answer his insulting address. The utmost exertion of which their courage was capable was to appear calm and to sit on their horses.

"And thou Sir Auvrai,—thou couldst not quit thy Saxon paramour, it seems; and by the mass I applaud thy taste more than thy judgment in letting her fall into the hands of Geoffrey Martel! By the arrow of Cupid, but she is a dainty looking dame! What say ye to the Saxon beauty comrades?" added he, turning to those who accompanied him, "two such prizes never before entered the harem of Anjou! Beauty and vengeance are my own: I would lose ten battles for this day!"

"Ruffian, the day is not yet over!" said Auvrai.

Digitized by Google

"As thou respectest the king of England, insult not the daughter of the Childe of Sussex" said Alfnoth, fiercely. "If thou darest to act against the laws of nations, sir count, the king of England will avenge us."

"I care neither for thee nor England," retorted the count. "If thy daughter, sir Childe, comes disguised into my towns as a spy, and probably a paramour of Duke William, and then escapes with a traitor like that villain Auvrai Gigaut, by all the rules which regulate men's conduct she is mine if I can capture her. Mine she is; and more—mine she shall be at my leisure. But as honour is due to rank, the wife of Duke William must take precedence of his Saxon mistress in my seraglio. Besides, Matilda is my oldest friend and well knows how much I am attached to her. I am a faithful knight, and follow her everywhere. As to this partner in the favours showered upon William and Harold by thy fair and generous daughter, this traitor Auvrai, he shall be hanged before the walls of Falaise ere to-morrow's sun sets in the western ocean."

"Sir Childe," said Auvrai to Alfnoth, whose rage choked his utterance, "heed not that miscreant; let him rave: but the wife of William, the affianced of Earl Harold and the daughter of Alfnoth, are not to be insulted so easily as the caitiff pretends. As to me, my death is perhaps sealed; the coward may take life from a man when bound whose arm he dreads when free." Then turning towards Martel, he cried aloud,—"I defy thee, miscreant, to a combat with five of thy best knights against my single arm, if thou darest to encounter Auvrai Gigaut!"

"The gallows is a more fit opponent for thee, and to it I will tie thee to-morrow."

"And it is just so to do, great count!" said the old man, who had stood by listening to what passed. "It is just, for that vile knight and his crew of robbers have basely treated me. They told me to seek justice of that bloody Duke William, but I knew better where to come,—and I implore at your feet that my money be restored to me, generous count! Three gold bezants is a sad deal for a poor man like me to lose. I know well that thou wilt help me, for my good cousin Martha, who lives in the Devil's Hole at

Digitized by Google

Cambrai, has no friend in the world like thee, O most generous count! and oftentimes has she sent me, poor old Aubin, on errands of thine."

"Art thou Aubin?" asked Anjou in a low voice, and stooping towards the old man.

"Yea verily, good count; thou knowest me not, but the Sieur Pecquigny knows me well."

"Ah poor Pecquigny," said Anjou. "Well, there are five bezants for thee, Aubin; Geoffrey Martel pays his soldiers' debts and those of Duke William's soldiers too. Old man, thou hast not been more robbed nor worse treated by Auvrai than I have been; but I will avenge our wrongs upon his body at noon to-morrow! Sir marshal of the camp, take order that we march by four o'clock to-morrow morning, so that we pitch our tents by ten in front of Falaise, upon the rocky heights west of the castle. There erect a gallows close to William's own chateau—even close to those windows from which his father first saw his mother in her tan-yard, Duke William and Earl Harold shall see Auvrai hanging by the neck. There they shall also see these dames sitting by my side, and beholding the execution of their lover. And more than that—for I will give their imagination pleasure as well as their sight—they shall know that to-morrow night will contribute as much to my vengeance as the day; he shall not take Matilda from me a second time till I grow tired of her and this Saxon beauty. Be careful then sir marshal, and see that all be prepared for giving this pleasant diversion to the duke of Normandy ere mid-day to morrow. Adieu ladies for a few hours—I am forced to sleep away this night, but Anjou will be blest by thy love to-morrow. Adieu!" then turning to his attendants, he added,—

"Take them to my quarters, and let all be strictly guarded; but Hudson the jailor will take precious care of them—he owes Auvrai a necklace:" he rode away.

"Most just and noble count!" cried the old man; then turning to the rest, he shook his hand at the prisoners, and added, "I will have more vengeance yet!"

When Matilda and Editha were alone—for Rose, Winifred, and the duchess's attendants were separated from their mistresses—they threw themselves into each other's arms

Digitized by Google

in utter despair. They were in the midst of the vast army collected by Anjou; William and Harold dared not leave the castle of Falaise; no intelligence could be sent to them of their capture, nor where they were—and if the whole fact was known, what could they do? Alas! alas! to-morrow would discover the full extent of their misery, when instead of being with friends, they would behold the sad tragedy preparing for the destruction of their happiness.

Editha implored her jailor to let her father be with them, but in vain. He was cast into a loathsome dungeon with Sir Auvrai by the scowling Hudson, whose heart rejoiced in the prospect of vengeance for his former defeat; cowardly and cruel, he sought to make durance more terrible by insult.

It may be said, boy Wace, that insults offered by the vile ought not to affect noble minds, but this is an idle theory. Brave men heed not so much the insults of some base wretch, as they are disturbed and irritated that they have not power to chastise the reptile as it deserves. The bite of the bug will deprive the strongest of their rest.

These unhappy ladies had no comfort but in the hopes of death; yet at the thoughts of suicide their minds revolted. They examined the place of their confinement to see if any means of escape was open, however dangerous it might be; but the doors were guarded by armed men, and beneath their windows, which were not high, thousands were assembled.

"What shall we do?" exclaimed Matilda.

"Trust in God, for He alone can assist us in these terrible straits," said Editha.

"None other can save us!" rejoined Matilda; "let us pray to Him for pity."

"Neither William nor Harold will quietly behold the scene to morrow; there will be a desperate battle. I only fear that they will fall in the attempt to save us."

"I am sure of it" said Matilda. "We have but one thing to do—we must give way to no fears. Nothing must shake our courage, dear Editha and we must be ready at every instant to fly. We are both swift of foot, the men will all

Digitized by Google

be in armour, and if we can see the least opening at any moment we will run and trust to our swiftness. There will be an attack, and that will perhaps afford us the opportunity to escape or be killed in the attempt, and death will be welcome if we fail. I am determined to seize the sword of Anjou at the execution, if all other means fail, and try to destroy him."

"I will do anything to escape. I think your advice is good. We must be ready to take advantage of any accidents."

Thus these two unhappy women passed the night in tears and prayers; and when day dawned, the loud preparations for the march rung through the town. The prisoners were quickly ordered to quit their apartment and proceed with the army, which now moved on to beleaguer Falaise. Sir Auvrai, loaded with chains, was placed upon a cart The others were Alfnoth, Elstan, Canute, and the female attendants of Matilda, with Rose and Winifred. The wailings of these women were loud, and contrasted with the calm appearance of their two mistresses, whose great beauty, haggard looks, and deathlike paleness, caused a strong interest in their favour. Many there wished matters otherwise than they were. Editha saw the feeling in their favour.

"If," said she aloud, "there are any Christians and brave men among ye, I call upon you in the name of all that is manly to resist this detested wretch, the count of Anjou, in his horrid treatment of unoffending ladies like this noble princess and myself! If any true knights be present, they must surely feel for the dishonour of this scene. Behold that noble knight! behold his treatment! O God! are there none here who have brave and feeling hearts! If such there be, help us when the hour comes! for William and Harold will not let these things be without a blow. As for the cowards who hear me, let them tremble!—a day of reckoning will come!" Here she was stopped by the guards, but her words had made a deep impression. The desperate exertion to make this harangue had greatly agitated her frame, and a flush was on her cheek which heightened her great beauty to such a degree that numbers of young hearts and strong arms inwardly turned traitors to the count of

Digitized by Google

Anjou, and swore, if opportunity offered, to protect her, the duchess and Auvrai.

"Off with these chains rascals!" cried Auvrai; "give me but freedom and a sword, and I will clear a passage through ye all. But William and Harold will avenge me yet!"

"Silence dog!" exclaimed Hudson, striking Auvrai across the mouth with the pommel of his sword, the blood spouted from the wound in abundance, and a groan of displeasure issued from the soldiers around. "Rascal!" "Caitiff!" "Jailor!" "Disgrace to our arms!"—resounded on all sides, and the frightened jailor was silent.

That base blow added to the hearts that Editha and Matilda's beauty had enlisted. When the jailor struck the brave Auvrai, and the cries arose against him, Editha and Matilda thought they were against Auvrai, and that he was going to be murdered; they screamed out in agony, and raising their hands cried aloud,—

"O God—O God of mercy, save him!" and their alarm called forth strange threats from among that armed host.

"Fear not ladies—fear not; it was that rascal Hudson."

Somewhat calmed at finding their mistake, but in great agitation, these beautiful women proceeded on their journey. They soon arrived at the environs of Falaise, and were met by Geoffrey Martel, who pitched his camp, as he proposed, on the heights close to the beautiful castle of Duke William, which is built on a precipitous rock, and seems impregnable. The troops quietly took their ground; not a man appeared upon the walls, except the usual sentinels; no stir was heard within.

"My God! my God! what does this portend?" whispered Matilda to her friend, whose eyes were fixed upon the castle.

"I know not, 'tis passing strange; they know not we are prisoners!"

"But they see the army," replied Matilda; "I wonder William does not assault them now?"

"He and Harold are not men to be thus quiet," observed Editha; "it argues some approaching event."

"Alas! they know not of our captivity, and have sent out to turn us back," said Matilda.

Digitized by Google

"Heaven grant my fears are not true, but I greatly dread that they have themselves gone to meet us, and are not within the castle."

"If so we are lost!" cried Matilda, almost fainting.

"No, no," whispered her companion, "fear not dear Matilda; keep up your courage—be ready, we know not what will happen—be ready to fly; if we could only get within bow-shot we should escape or be killed by arrows—be ready; Merciful heaven! there is the gallows! courage, courage dear Matilda!"

"I am resolved Editha, fear me not, but my agony is great."

Here the count of Anjou rode up.

"No more nonsense dames! I am a rough lover; dismount them, guards, and lead them to the platform of the gallows. If Duke William sends a flight of arrows he will shoot his wife! Ha, ha, ha! now I will wring the caitiff's heart even in the castle where he was begotten! Come, my sultanas! ye shall first see Gigaut hanged, and then I will soothe your gentle hearts with my love and caresses!"

Anger overpowered the fears of Matilda, a flush of rage overspread her lovely cheeks,—

"Base wretch, thou art about to murder a noble knight; but the daughter of Earl Baldwin and the wife of Duke William, are not to be treated with impunity."

"If there are brave and true men present," exclaimed Editha aloud, and in a voice of agony and despair, "be ready—the hour of vengeance approaches, let your swords defend the innocent."

A loud murmur arose.

"What, rascals! do you murmur at the words of a silly wench like this?"

"There is but one rascal here," cried a voice from the crowd.

"Seize that villain and bind him! Come dames, to the scaffold."

An awful silence reigned through the army; some regarded the scaffold, but most looked to the castle; fearful calmness reigned; not a breath was heard.

Digitized by Google

The gallows was erected on a steep and prominent rocky point, just opposite the palace of Duke William; about a bow-shot therefrom at one side was a bench, on which sat the count of Anjou between Matilda and Editha, who seemed now to have lost all sense of fear; their eyes flashed fire, their cheeks were flushed, a raging fever seemed to consume them, and something like insanity was observable in their wild looks, while their beauty was transcendent.

"Yet, yet!" said Matilda, "be firm!"

"Fear me not," answered Editha, "they will soon appear."

As they addressed each other fearlessly across Anjou, he heard all they said.

"No, no," said their brutal tormentor, "he is tired of you, he will neither try to save ye nor look at ye: mayhap he is now laughing at you through yon loophole of the room in which he was born."

"Courage Matilda, courage!" said Editha; "God protects us!"

"Is the traitor's neck ready, Coupe-gorge?"

"Yea verily, he will hang like an angel sir count; a good thick bull-necked gentleman as I ever handled; short throttle and heavy carcase—quite a pleasant job sir count; he will choke in five minutes."

"Sound a parley to the castle trumpeter."

The trumpet sounded, and one from the walls answered.

"Is Duke William within your castle-walls?" cried the count's herald.

"Yes," said a voice from the tower.

"Is Earl Harold?"

"Yes," answered the voice from the tower.

"The count of Anjou invites the duke of Normandy and Earl Harold to witness the hanging of Auvrai Gigaut, the traitor; and also to see the Duchess Matilda and the Lady Editha, both of whom the count of Anjou has honoured by taking them to be his paramours."

The voice from the castle made no answer to this. The hills were covered with troops, the valleys filled with armed men, but all were silent, and men scarce dared to breathe, when a shrill voice from the wall cried aloud:—

Digitized by Google

"Count of Anjou be not vile,
Bide thee, bide thee yet awhile.
Let not brave Sir Auvrai perish,
Nor make Duke William vengeance cherish;
Take forthwith a ransom rare,
For the knight and ladies fair;
Half his duchy William offers,
Half his earldom Harold proffers;
Take the chance that fate doth give,
Let the brave Sir Auvrai live,
Nor ransom for the dames deny,
Beyond thy principality."

"'Tis the Vala," said Editha.

"Vengeance is better than ransom!" cried the count, in a loud voice. "I reject all ransom!

The dreadful words echoed against the castle walls, and a murmur arose among the count's troops, then all was again still as death.

"Run him up Coupe-gorge!" cried the count fiercely; "adieu Sir Auvrai the traitor."

"Adieu dear ladies!" said Auvrai, "and as for thee, adieu liar, traitor, coward! William and Harold will avenge my murder on thy base carcase." The knight was drawn up, but then an alarm was heard in rear of the army.

"Ha! what is that?" cried the count.

"The enemy! The enemy are upon us!" was now the cry, and the loud noise of battle rose sudden and boisterous from the background.

"Courage Matilda, courage!"

"I am ready Editha, happen what may."

The attack from behind was furious. The count mounted his war-horse; all eyes were directed to the spot.

"Guards, be careful of the women and that half-hanged dog there," said Martel, as he rode off to meet the unexpected attack, which seemed to press hard upon his men, who were retreating fast.

Editha and Matilda whispered, and then leaping at two of the guards, they suddenly seized their swords, and ran to Elstan and Canute, who met them half way.

"Cut the rope," exclaimed they, as Elstan leaped high, and at a blow down came the murdered Auvrai. The

Digitized by Google

guards instantly fell upon the Saxons, who fiercely defended themselves, while Matilda called out,—

"Now Editha fly," and down they both darted towards a path well known to Matilda; but not three paces had they taken when the guards seized them.

"O my God! we are lost!" exclaimed Matilda.

"Not yet," shouted William and Harold, bursting from the path which led up the precipice from the castle, and as they spoke they slew the nearest guards.

"To the castle" said Harold; and off Matilda and Editha flew with the speed of lightning through the followers of William, who rushed furiously after their chief with loud shouts: a signal from the castle soon after proclaimed to William and Harold that the princess and Editha were safe within the walls. In the interim which had elapsed between the rescue of the duchess and her friend, the fight had been severe about the lifeless body of Sir Auvrai, which was borne off by the Normans. William and Harold made a dreadful carnage of the Angevins.

"Sir duke, retire," cried the spokesman of a large body of knights that now arrived; "we came here to free the duchess, and the Lady Editha, but as you have already done so, we must now use our arms against you if you persevere in your sortie; if you retire we will cover your retreat to the castle, no man shall pursue you."

The duke and Harold had held their hands from havoc while the utterer of the above speech made his harangue; for the attendants of the duchess had made their way to the scene of action.

"Come quick Rose, Winifred," cried Harold, Elstan, and Canute, in a breath, and the whole bevy of females ran to their friends.

"Down the path" cried William, "fly!" and the Norman maidens of Matilda, who knew the place well, led the way. The whole transaction was the affair of an instant, and the leader of the band of knights was again about to speak when the sword of Duke William clove him to the chine.

"Slay the Angevin dogs! no quarter, no mercy! forward, Normans, *Dex aie!* to the rescue ho!" shouted William; and his eight thousand followers cut all upon the height to pieces.

Digitized by Google

"Harold and vengeance," was the cry of the Saxon, as his battle-axe hewed down knight after knight at every blow: Auvrai was avenged.

Alfnoth was now reached by Harold. The Childe was desperately engaged with numbers; but the arm of his countryman soon freed him.

"Bear him off, Elstan and Canute; he is hurt."

"Not badly" said Alfnoth, "but I am exhausted." He fell senseless, and his faithful followers bore him off the field.

"Stop" said Elstan, "I see Coupe-gorge, and by Odin I'll slit his weasand before we part." The Saxon sprung to the gallows where the executioner lay unhurt, but pretending to be dead. "Excuse me comrade, I have no time to hang thee," saying these words Elstan buried his sword in the wretch's bowels. Coupe-gorge roared for mercy.

"What, the *coup de grâce*, eh?—take it dog!" and Elstan stabbed him to the heart.

"The villains will gather upon us; let us retire Harold, for we shall be outnumbered here; the shouts are retiring on the other side. Mallet has done his work, and the whole are now coming back upon us; those knaves crossing the valley bear this way." Thus spoke William, and the two heroes ordering their men to retire, placed their own shields on their backs, and leisurely walked down the winding path, protected by the wood and rocks from the showers of arrows and javelins that were cast after them. The arblast and bowmen from the walls let fly their missives in showers, covering the retreat of their lord, while shouts of triumph and defiance rent the air from the multitudes which now crowded the towers and ramparts of Falaise.

No sooner had they reached the stream beneath the high rocks on which the palace of Duke Robert stands, than Matilda met them and sprung into the arms of William.

"By the splendour of God! my sweet dame, but I have been much to blame in this matter, and well have I been punished," said the duke, as he folded his wife in his arms. "Here is Harold, who once or twice was half-inclined to throw me out of yon window, over these rocks above our heads."

Digitized by Google

"Indeed fair princess," said Harold; "if letting you cross the country was somewhat imprudent, and greatly opposed to my will, I assure you he has so suffered that I had more trouble to hinder him jumping out of that lofty window than I should have had to push him out; nor do I think either of us would have survived our misfortune, but to take vengeance upon that miscreant count."

They now arrived at the palace, where they found Editha, who allowed herself to be clasped in the arms of Harold, for joy overpowered all other feelings.

"And now" said Matilda, "how has it all happened?"

"There," said the duke, pointing to the Vala, "there is your saviour, under God; last night she arrived, and told us how, in the disguise of an old man, she had heard the orders of Anjou; thus knowing his projects, we sent Mallet out of the town last night with half the garrison, to conceal himself in the woods till certain signals were made from the castle, upon which he was to attack the rear of the enemy's camp; and when we thought their attention and chief force were called away to oppose him, Harold and I, who have been concealed with the other half of the garrison beneath the rocks ever since daybreak, were to rush out, as we did, and carry you off. The whole has, thank God, succeeded, and we must now march out to join Mallet in case he is pursued; but I think Harold and myself gave them such work upon the height that they know not well what to do, and will hardly leave their camp to follow him."

At this moment word was brought from the tower that I and my force of twelve thousand men were returning unpursued by the Angevin forces; and shortly after I entered Falaise, bringing with me a few prisoners, whom the duke questioned as to the count's numbers, and then ordered to be slain outside the walls; but, boy Wace, I was so glad the ladies had escaped, that, as it was now near dark, I delayed their execution, and when night came Harold and I stole them away, pushed them clandestinely outside the gates, and bid them to wait till the duke saw them in the morning: however, the dogs scampered off.

Boy, I always thought that prisoners are too few or too many to kill, and so I always spared them. When prisoners

Digitized by Google

are taken the king's word is pledged, and the king's word must not be broken. But when King William was wroth, he spared no man, save out of policy. At Hastings we made no prisoners: such were his orders.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Geoffrey, being in fight overthrown,
Dies in a convent all alone,
And thus the devil got his own:
This pleases William very well,
And he takes to tolling a curfew-bell.

THE duke of Normandy had expected the enemy would penetrate into the plains of Caen, devastating all the flat country, and in proportion as the troops collected plunder their numbers would diminish. Now the day after the events which I have just recorded, the count of Anjou marched with his confederate army down the banks of the Orne towards Caen, destroying the country with fire and sword. He was closely followed by William at the head of twenty thousand men. From Caen Anjou directed his march upon the bridge of Varaville, with the intention of ravaging the Pays d'Auge, and eventually beleaguering Rouen. On perceiving the designs of the enemy, with that sagacity and daring which belongs alone to great commanders, Duke William marched in the night-time to Baven, in the vicinity of the bridge of Varaville, where he carefully placed his small army in ambush, and awaited the arrival of his foe.

When, from his place of concealment in the neighbourhood, he observed that half the French army had passed the bridge, he gave the signal to his own army, which burst from its cover, and bore down with loud cries upon the rear of the enemy, who, thus taken by surprise, was thrown into confusion, and rushed in disorder towards the bridge, the passage of which was instantly choked by the numbers who attempted to cross it. Being old, and of wood, it broke and

Digitized by Google

all those upon it were thrown into the river Dive. The duke de Berri commanded this wing of the army, he attempted to rally it by his personal courage, but the impetuous Harold, who led the assailants, clove his skull with his battle-axe, and the disorder which followed became irreparable. On each side of the road was an impracticable marsh; the river, far from being fordable, was of greater depth than usual, in consequence of the rising of the tide, so that the enemy found as great danger in their endeavours to escape, as they did from the Norman soldiers, whose vengeance was unsparing. Their duke, furious at the destruction of his country, urged them on by his voice and by his example; and "*Dex aie! et notre Dame!* resounded through the field as the charging squadrons drove the defeated forces into the deep current of the Dive. The flowing tide, which had swelled the river to receive them in its full bosom, was gorged, and having accomplished its errand again rolled back to the ocean, bearing with it its thousands and tens of thousands: the sea covered them!

After this great victory, and the death of Henry I., William had general peace with his neighbours, for Baldwin, his father-in-law, became regent of France during the nonage of King Philip I., who was then only nine years of age. The count of Anjou having seen the greatest part of his army destroyed, his most powerful allies taken prisoners in the battles of Montemer and Varaville, and hopeless of any assistance on the part of France, now decidedly leagued with his mortal foe, abandoned himself to despair; renouncing all human affairs, he made over his estates to his heir, became a monk in the abbey of St. Nicholas of Angers, and after a short period died of a broken heart.

Duke William disbanded his army, and was triumphantly received in his capital of Rouen. Alfnoth, Editha, and the Vala returned to England immediately after the combat at Falaise, but Harold remained, in the hope of inducing William to liberate his brother Wulfnoth and his nephew Haco, whom the earl his father had given as hostages to the king of England, and the latter had transferred them, more secure custody, to the court of Normandy.

Duke William now made various ordinances for the

Digitized by Google

security of his duchy, and among others, he ordered that every evening the bell should toll at a certain hour in each parish throughout Normandy, and when the parish bell tolled, that every house should be shut up and every fire extinguished; that all people should then pray and retire to rest. This rule of the "*couvre-feu*" or "curfew," was one of great advantage, maintaining order throughout the land. And for the better security of peaceful citizens, a guard of archers patrolled the streets of all the great cities during the night.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"A Baiex ceu souloient dire,
Fist assembler un grant concile,
Tous les corz sainz fist demander,
Et en un lieu tous assembler."

HAROLD now wished to depart for England, and Duke William thought it time to take such measures for securing his fealty as the occasion permitted; it was therefore determined to make the Saxon chief swear in public to assist in placing the crown of England on the head of William in case of the death of Edward.

At this time died the bishop of Bayeux, and Odon, maternal brother to the duke of Normandy, succeeded to the vacant see. William wishing to make the oath of fealty (which Harold was about to take) as solemn as possible, removed with all his court to have the ceremony performed in the cathedral of Bayeux by his brother Odon, for the base Mauger, archbishop of Rouen, had given William mortal offence by objecting to his marriage with Matilda, as being within the limits of blood prohibited by the holy Church—strange error, for Duke William had no relationship to Matilda.

When the court was assembled at Bayeux, William seated himself in the great hall of the episcopal palace, on a throne prepared for the occasion. He was in his ducal robes, he

Digitized by Google

held the drawn sword of the duchy in his hand, and behind him stood all the chivalry of Normandy. At the foot of the throne, and on the right hand of the duke, stood Odon, bishop of Bayeux. The fastuous prelate was clothed in pontifical robes, the mitre on his head, the crosier in his hand; the train of his robe was supported by four priests, while the bearers of huge silver censers cast the perfumes of frankincense around him. On the left hand stood William Fitzosborne, afterwards earl of Hereford: he was in complete armour, with his spear in his hand.

In front of William were two shrines covered with burning tapers and ornamented with precious stones in all the richness of religious pageantry; on one of them lay the Holy Bible, on the other stood a crucifix.

The shrines were moveable, and two bearers stood by each. On one side of these shrines were the religious attendants of the bishop, the heads of convents, and all those belonging to the church; on the other side were the advocates and people of the law, with esquires and pages belonging to the knights.

Harold now entered the gorgeous apartment. He was clothed in a rich tunic, which reached to his knees, and over his shoulders hung the cloak of a Saxon atheling of royal blood—for he was grandson to the great Canute. When he entered the chamber all eyes were upon him: he was not, as I have before said, so gigantic in stature as Duke William, but he was of an active and powerful frame; broad shouldered, full chested, and of a portly demeanour. Even I, his enemy, must admit, good Robert Wace, that he was a man of grandeur to behold, and his haughty brow and proud deportment never seemed to abate in the presence of Duke William.

He strode up the hall. His countenance was severe and full of thought, and on arriving at the space between the shrines he bowed lowly to the duke.

"Noble Earl Harold of England," said William in a loud and slow voice, as he arose and bowed to the Saxon chief, "well thou knowest that thy royal lord, his grace Edward king of England has bequeathed to me the realms of England at his death—which Heaven avert for many a long year!"

Digitized by Google

Here the duke held up his hands, and looked towards Heaven in supplication, while the prelate and all the holy men crossed themselves, and cried "Amen!"

"Amen!" re-echoed Harold, and bowed as he crossed his hands upon his breast.

"But," continued Duke William, "when the King of kings so wills it that our beloved cousin Edward should depart this life, and be installed in the mansions of the blessed, to me reverts the crown of England; and therefore have I summoned these, the great men of my duchy, to thy presence and to mine, that before them and the whole world, thou, O great and noble Saxon, thou, the first subject of the Saxon realms and their greatest warrior, may say that Edward bequeaths his crown to me should I survive that gracious monarch; and further, that thou the greatest of the Saxon chiefs, should swear before the high throne of God and in presence of this holy company"—here the duke touched the bishop on the shoulder with his sword—"to give me homage and fealty, and to assist me, in the supposed case thy lawful sovereign, to ascend my throne."

"For that purpose, Duke William, great sovereign of the Normans, do I stand here before thee and the assembled nobles of thy land. I am ready to swear all that thou hast said is sooth."

"Then Odon, bishop of Bayeux, do thine office," said the Norman prince. The prelate stepped forward between the shrines.

"Earl, give me thine hands between mine," said he, "and repeat after me."

Harold did what the ecclesiastic desired him.

"I swear!" said Harold, "that King Edward (God's will and command notwithstanding) does fully intend that the Saxon crown shall pass from his revered head to that of the duke of Normandy, for aught I know to the contrary, and that he sent me to these realms to confirm this, his present will and intention, to his noble cousin. And I do further swear that in such an event taking place I will use all my influence by council, and all my power by force of arms, to enforce the fulfilment of our beloved lord's will and testament."

Digitized by Google

"Place thine hands, one upon the holy bible on thy right, the other upon the holy crucifix on thy left, and swear," said the bishop.

Harold extended is arms, and placing his hands as desired, exclaimed—

"I swear, upon the Evangelists and the holy rood, to be true to my royal lord the king and his noble successor!"

"And upon the holiest relics that this world contains!" said the duke of Normandy, as he rose, crossed himself, and bowed reverently; the whole assembly doing the like reverence.

"Raise the shrines bearers."

The shrines were raised, and when their drapery was removed, beneath appeared two chests filled with the most precious relics of our blessed worship.

A flush of indignation passed across the cheeks of Harold, but he instantly recovered his self-possession, and smote his heart, saying proudly—"The oath I have taken, duke of Normandy, shall be duly maintained."

"If not," observed the bishop, "thou art in peril of utter damnation; for even beyond the book and the cross in reverence are these enshrined relics! But extinguish this sacred torch," added he, giving one to Harold; "and if you violate your oath, may your soul smoke in the flame of hell as the extinguished flambeau reeks and steams in thine hand!"

"Even so!" said Harold, as he grasped the torch, and turning it down, dashed it so strongly on the floor that it was extinguished at once, and no smoke followed.

"Bishop there is no smoke! master there is no smoke!" cried Gallet the fool, who during the ceremony had marched up with his large stick, and seated himself on the steps of the throne behind the bishop.

The colour flushed up in the duke's face as he said, in a stern voice, between his teeth, "Silence, fool! or by God I'll flay thee alive."

"That won't make his torch smoke, Uncle William, though it would make me smoke;" saying this he laid his bâton over his shoulder, and walked away. As he went out he turned round and again said, "No smoke bishop!"

Digitized by Google

Harold, whose quick eye had seen the blush on William's cheek, and the annoyance given to him by the fool, said aloud, "The fool is right! there is no smoke; but it is because there is no falsehood."

"It is a sign from heaven," said the duke; "and I accept the divine confirmation of Earl Harold's faith. And now," continued he, "brave earl, let me give thee a token of my regard and the obligation I am under to that brave arm in our late wars. Behold this suit of Milan armour! wear it, brave Earl Harold, in memory of our combats. You will scarcely find one of better proof in England."

Saying this he descended from his throne, and assisted in arming Harold; which when done, he girded on the sword, and then placing his hand upon the head of the Saxon warrior said—"Accept, companion in arms, this gift from one who hath beheld thy extraordinary prowess in battle: a prowess so great that I have never seen a cavalier that I could call thy equal. As it is thy pleasure to depart from Normandy—but I would thy stay were longer—so I have prepared a vessel to bear thee to thy native land. It is stored with the richest presents that Normandy can afford. Go! and God be with thee! The day we meet again will be the happiest one in the life of William of Normandy."

"Great duke! the greatest gift that thou hast given me is freedom from the dungeons of Abbeville; the next is restoring my brother Wulfnoth to his country. Would that my nephew Haco might also accompany us! But there must be bounds to generosity as to all other things: to thee and all that now surround thee in this splendid assembly, I return thanks for my reception in Normandy. One more visit, great duke, to England thou surely yet canst make—to Sussex the distance is not far: there come, and however great thy retinue may be, Harold will welcome them with such honour as his poor means afford; but all honour would still fall short before thy grandeur and thy merits. Yet my reception shall still be so warm that it will live in the records of hospitality. Adieu then, most excellent duke! and ye, nobles and knights of Normandy! ay, all, even to the lowest bowman of the guard, in whose company I have

Digitized by Google

fought the Angevins, come singly or together, and let the castle of Harold be your home!"

Saying these words he bowed to the duke and to the whole assembly, amidst shouts and cries of "Thanks, noble Saxon!"

But Duke William would not so part with him. Followed by the company he attended Harold to his horse, which awaited the Saxon chief in the court-yard of the episcopal palace.

"Boy bring me wine!" said William, as Harold raised his foot to the stirrup and mounted. "Health and God speed to Earl Harold!" cried the duke as he raised the golden goblet high in the air; then first drinking from it himself, he presented the cup to the Saxon chief, who pledged the Norman in the Saxon tongue, crying aloud—"YARHAEL!" while from all parts of the yard were heard exclamations of "Adieu! adieu! Success to the brave Saxon!" He then departed with his followers for Dives, where he found the magnificent vessel prepared for him by William, and sailed for England.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Tostig likes to make the whip fall,
The Saxons don't like that at all;
Harold comes up to quell the riot,
Which makes poor Editha happy and quiet.

ON a fine autumnal evening, in the year of our Redeemer one thousand and sixty-five, a fair damsel sat in melancholy mood at a window in the highest tower of a Saxon castle in the kingdom of Northumberland. This castle was on a small eminence, and the walls were low, but of great strength. The height on which it stood terminated a ridge, along which a camp of insurgent Saxons was pitched. Against the cruelty of Tostig, Harold's brother, they had arisen and appealed to King Edward for justice and protection. The king's banner floated on the castle, and in the

Digitized by Google

camp were the Earls Morcar and Edwin, the sons of Alfnoth. The insurgents were half naked, and ill-armed generally; the greater number bore the seax of battle, but a vast troop of the two earls' richer retainers were clad in chain-armour, and bore huge battle-axes. Hutted the soldiers were, for the neighbouring woods furnished branches; and so far were they regular that the different districts had separate encampments: here were Westmoreland men, there those of Cumberland, and far northwards the shrewd, tall Yorkshire horsemen lay, intent on selling their strong war-horses to the Mercians and fiery Welshmen, who, stout and active on foot, were unused, though ambitious, to manage the steed in war. These Welshmen had been hired by the earls as auxiliaries.

In this intricate city of bowers, innumerable groups were seen busily engaged in cooking, talking, or manly exercises; while drinking parties and drunken broils disturbed almost every quarter of the encampment. The beautiful glades and romantic openings of the surrounding woods, at a short distance, were less crowded; there, under the oaks, lay the armed chiefs with their attendants; and their caparisoned steeds, tied to trees, sent forth their shrill neighings from one to another, while the more vulgar chargers answered from the camp. The rude serfs, distinguished by their brazen collars and bracelets, were bearing provisions and pitchers of water from the far off and noisy booths, where they suffered and returned the idle jests of the armed men and the bold women who accompanied the army for love and plunder.

In every direction the camp fires blazed cheerfully; but all was not joyous in the camp; for here and there among the trees were tied up poor serfs, whose fierce masters chastised them—which is ever most meet and just for their neglect and insolence—their shrill shrieks resounded through the woods as the heavy stripe fell upon their broad shoulders, or when nailed to trees by the ears the castigating fire was lighted nearer than the half-roasted dogs found pleasant. And in sooth, good Robert Wace, those Saxon chiefs would often sear the hide of a slave sharply, much as they complained of our rough usage after; but myself I do not very

Digitized by Google

highly approve of such cruel dealings with the knaves for small offences. I ever practised more knightly gentleness; and, as thou well knowest, have rarely done more hurt to a slave than to slit his nose or his ears with my dagger, when my girths were slack or my call not quickly obeyed. When the blood grows sluggish boy, these gentle bleedings relieve a slave's dulness, and are of great avail both for his own advantage and that of his lord: they are better than the more severe mutilations, than the tortures by fire and the rack, which enfeeble the villains and render them less serviceable to their liege-lord, which is a matter worthy of consideration; for, besides that a knight should be generous, it is not wise to expend slaves too freely: they are costly, and punishment may, by a caution in the infliction thereof, be made very exquisite without much wrong to the muscular power of the serf. But to continue my narrative.

At a distance, on some neighbouring hills, was the army of Tostig, whose troops were few in number, but somewhat more orderly, being composed merely of his own house-ceorls and those of his friends: it was supposed that they would scarcely encounter the great host of insurgents brought by Morcar; but Tostig was resolved, if practicable, to try his fate in battle: however, he prudently avoided the combat till he saw how the king would act, to whom both sides had referred their grievances.

Such was the state of these two armies, when the damsel whom we have mentioned was seen looking from her turret; nor had she long watched ere, over the distant hills, a light dust arose, and soon was seen the glitter of armed horsemen; for the sun, though low in the horizon, still flung its slanting beams along the land. These light riders descended the hill, clearing the advance, and shortly after a heavier cloud arose from the fretted road, and the dark mass of the ap proaching host was seen crossing the height and winding its long array adown the embarrassed ground. From front to-rear occasional coruscations of light burst sparkling upon the eye, as the turnings of the march gave their polished armour to the sun.

"Father! father!" cried the maiden when the first horse-man appeared, "troops approach the castle." And no sooner

Digitized by Google

were the words uttered than all was confusion in the camp; the clangour of trumpets sounding "to horse," rung through the woods, and "to arms! to arms!" re-echoed far and wide. The leaders came riding armed from their more remote fires into the camp, the hurried serfs hastily collected the baggage; the spear, the battle-axe, the seax, the club, the bow, and the sling were brandished, and some thirty chiefs, well mounted, sallied forth cautiously towards the approaching army. They were headed by the Earls Alfnoth and Morcar, attended by a few active bowmen, forming the camp-guards. In the army of Tostig there appeared also great confusion, and it was soon perceived to be in battle array. All eyes were turned on the two lords who approached the unknown foe.

Editha, for it was she who had first seen the advancing strangers, was quickly on horseback surrounded by her guards under the faithful Elstan.

"Lady," quoth he, "'twere well to gain the road into Mercia, whence we can see how these strangers act; for if they be Danes or Norsemen coming from the Humber to help Tostig, our army cannot stand before them, and will be enclosed. And even if these be king's men from London, they will, I ween, take part with Duke Tostig all the same; for his sister, Queen Editha, befriends him, as our folks say."

"True Elstan; but thinkest thou man that I will leave my father and my brother? No, I will even venture, like a true Saxon woman, to keep in the camp and trust my safety to our men."

"By Odin, lady! but I approve your courage; old Colgrin always said thou hadst a true Saxon heart, and were fit to wed the Lord Harold."

Editha blushed deeply, as the honest Saxon expressed the wishes of the southerns, who all desired to wed their far-famed "*swan-necked maid with the twisted locks*," to the much-loved Saxon chief.

"Talk not of Earl Harold thus Elstan," said Editha, sighing deeply; "the earl is in Normandy, would he were in England to quiet these troubles."

"Would he were with us now, mistress mine, for none but

Digitized by Google

he could get the Northumbrians through this day if that army yonder be Norwegians or Danes. I speak with no disparagement to your father, my master, and your brother, lady; but no one except the great earl himself could save us. Curse those Normans! would to Odin that Loke had them!"

Editha bore this compliment to her lover at the expense of her father and brother, with that Christian resignation which was habitual to her; but her eyes were intently fixed upon the latter chiefs, who now approached the intruders: from the latter a small party of men had detached themselves and rode rapidly towards Alfnoth, over whose head a royal banner waved, to mark him as one deputed by the king. The archers closed in upon him as the strangers drew nigh, but suddenly one galloped forward singly and the father of Editha did the same; they leaped from their horses, and she observed them both embrace. Then the stranger chief, turning to his followers, made a trumpet sound; this was answered by the clangour of a thousand horns, which rung out responsive, from squadron to squadron through the advancing army, which instantly halted and begun to form a line.

A horseman, who had returned from where Alfnoth stood with Morcar, now reached the camp, and quickly shout on shout arose; and in the wild hurras, as they reached Editha, the name of Harold burst upon her ears!

"Harold!" she uttered no more.

"By the rood, lady! but I think that is the great earl himself coming towards us!" said the keen-eyed huntsman; but quick as his eye was, Editha had seen the rapid approach of her lover before Elstan spoke. That chief no sooner had ordered his army to halt and occupy the ground he pointed out, than mounting his horse he dashed at full gallop towards the castle, where Editha stood, leaving his marshals, his standard-bearer, and chief officers with his troops. As he swiftly rode through the skirts of the camp a thousand questions crossed him.

"Sir knight! sir knight! is the great earl there? is Earl Harold there?" cried a thousand voices; but he shot past and answered not.

Digitized by Google

"May the foul fiend take thee, thou sulky churl!" said one.

"By Odin! I would send an arrow into him!" said another.

"Let us slay him and pay his '*were*' among us, even though he be '*a twelfhind*,'" quoth a third; but the armed cavalier rode furiously on, and the dirt and stones cast up by his horse's hoofs were his only reply.

Editha, whose bright eye saw his approach with delight, had sprung from her horse, and entering the castle she proceeded at once to her apartment, where she abided his arrival; nor did she long wait.

"Elstan, my friend! where is your mistress?" said Harold as he leaped from his panting steed.

"In her bower, noble earl" replied the overjoyed retainer of Alfnoth, and in an instant Harold folded her in his armed embrace.

"Harold! my own Harold! art thou then once more with me, and in our own Saxon land? How got ye from the Norman net? and art thou well? Oh! yes, I see thou art well, and happy! but thou art thin Harold!"

"Yes Editha, I am out of the Norman den, and well and happy—and thin also, for I have fretted and had no rest till I got where I am, at your own dear side."

He looked all he said: his powerful form, expansive mailed chest, and strongly-knit limbs, showed indeed no lack of muscle, but his cheek was less full, and marked with care; yet his deep blue Saxon eyes shone forth in all their brilliance under his dark brow, their native fierceness softened as he gazed upon the woman of his love.

"But tell me Harold, tell me how you got away from the duke; for I had ever my fears that he would detain you at Rouen."

"In sooth Editha, I hardly expected to escape, and was obliged to swear that I would assist him to the throne, when Edward dies. But of this anon; for the story is long, and we must talk of it at leisure."

"How can you assist him Harold, when all the Saxons are resolved to have you?"

"I will assist him Editha, if Edward bequeaths the throne

Digitized by Google

to him, and the Saxons agree to it; but if those to whom the throne belongs choose to give it to me, I am no longer Harold the subject, bound to aid my king, Lord William, to be king of England; but Harold the king, bound to defend my realms against William duke of Normandy, an invader."

"I hope he never will invade our land."

"I hope so too Editha; but he is a designing politician and a bold warior, full of ambition: England is worth the attempt. However, Edward still lives, when he dies we shall see what is to be done."

As Harold said this, Alfnoth entered.

"At last," said the Childe, "we have again met in England. But in what a state is the country! I was sent here to reconcile the Northumbrians to your brother; but both sides are so furious that, as I wrote to his grace our liege lord the king, I am unable to effect a reconciliation. My sons are ready to submit to anything that Edward orders; but if they are placed at the mercy of your brother, he will destroy them: while he, on the other hand, demands an unconditional obedience to his rule."

"Most excellent Childe!" replied Harold sternly, "when two armies are thus closely approached we must be prompt; I will therefore take immediate steps to meet Earls Morcar and Edwin, and hear what Duke Tostig has to urge. My army must first be refreshed after our long march, and the soldiers will then be in due order to act upon my decision. I will attend to the quarrel, and, as God is my judge, my decision shall be that which is just between the Northumbrians and my brother. Go forth then, most noble Alfnoth, and tell your sons to convoke the folkmotes among their troops: let Earl Morcar be the representative of the Northumbrians against Duke Tostig; and on the morrow at midday I will in my camp hear the dispute pleaded. I have sent one of my thanes to Tostig with similar directions, and notice that if he commits any act of hostility against the Northumbrian army, I will fall upon his troops in the king's name, for such are my liege's commands. Go then, brave Childe, and tell the Northumbrians that a breach of the peace against my brother's troops will be visited in like manner upon them; and, moreover, let all

Digitized by Google

men know that if the two parties engage in strife, I will hang the leaders on either side, even though these leaders be Morcar and Tostig. I am not come here to pay respect to persons, but to quell an insurrection against the king's lawful authority; and this can only be done by justice. Now, if either, or both sides, enter upon hostilities I can only act by violence: they stifle justice, and must abide the consequence."

"Mighty earl! be it as thou sayest and willest, for thy decision is right before God and man; and if my sons are disobedient, let them perish by their own folly!" said Alfnoth, and immediately departed to give his instructions to the Northumbrian chiefs.

"Editha," said Harold, "it is painful to be judge between your brother and mine; but you know Harold too well to doubt his justice, and you are too noble and generous and just, to wish that he, vested as he is with supreme power, should offend against the truth, even for thy brothers' sakes."

"They have taken a fearful step thus to rise in arms against the duke of Northumberland, their liege lord. But truly, Harold, the stories which they tell of his cruelty are heartrending."

"I know him to be savage; but the Northumbrians are a wild set to rule."

"Wild indeed, Harold! Since I have been here with my father horrid things have been done; and Morcar and Edwin tell me the chiefs are very barbarous towards their ceorls and serfs. Alas! how men use each other! But say, my Harold, why did you swear fealty to Duke William?"

"Listen Editha! I was a prisoner among mine enemies; my life was at stake: I promised to aid William if he was heir to the Saxon throne, but I did not and could not, promise him that I would make him king. If the king and the people proclaim William king I will be true and faithful to him, according to my oath; but if Edward do not leave the throne to the duke of Normandy, or, if so leaving it, the Saxon people declare that they will not receive a foreigner whose countrymen they hate, then, Editha, I think I am not bound to exceed my oath, and create a civil war in England to place a man on the throne who has no right to it: and

Digitized by Google

all this because an oath was forced upon me by him, who held me in unjust thraldom. I have sworn to assist William to gain his throne, but if the throne be not given to him by those who alone can of right bestow it, mine oath falls to the ground invalid. I swore it, knowing that Edward wishes and intends to crown the Norman if he can; but I did not swear that I would not tell Edward the truth, as I have always done, and the truth is that the people of England will never submit to a Norman king, and would rise in arms against him: all know this, and Edward will doubtless do as he has always done, give way to the wishes of the Saxons. If they choose me for their king I am the rightful lord, and no clerc can maintain, however cunning in book lore he may be, that a forced oath to assist William if he be named king of England by Edward, is to prevent my assisting myself against him, if Edward and the Saxons declare me king."

Such was the reasoning of Harold, and truly, good Robert Wace, I, though a Norman, did always think that the Saxon had reason on his side, and he would have been a base ceorl had he done other than he did, though in those days it would not have been over safe for any man to say so; for the Conqueror, though sometimes generous, was full of suspicion, and thought little of any man's life that angered him, or thwarted his will.

The subsequent events proved how just the views of King Harold were. The Norman victory at Hastings was the ruin of the Saxon: eorl, ceorl, and serf have been involved in one general ruin by our Norman barons. Verily, boy Wace, I could not live among them; I sold my lands and came back to Normandy, for I liked not to see the cruel slavery to which those poor Saxons were reduced. Death, torture, and rapine are upon them; the highest thanes of the land now labour in chains, and receive the rack and stripe from the lowest Norman barons, knights, or men-at-arms; and as the most nobly born Saxon maidens become women, they are first taken by the Norman chiefs, then delivered over to the basest grooms. The high Saxon dames have all been taken from their husbands, and earn a doubtful existence among the common soldiers, who as their beauty departs, make them labour till their strength fail,

Digitized by Google

and then they are slain as useless. This Harold well knew would be their fate, and against this he fought like a great king, dying to save his people.

When Harold left Editha, she felt all the happiness which his arrival bestowed upon her. She had greatly doubted the success of the policy which she had instilled into the Norman duke through the Vala; for it was Editha who planned the expedition to Normandy and prompted the Vala. That strange and bold woman at once seized the spirit of the plan, and when the unfortunate capture of Editha by Pecquigny prevented her taking the further direction of their plan and added to their difficulties, Frica executed the details with that skill and presence of mind peculiar to her character. Editha and the Vala, as well as Alfnoth, came to England, greatly fearing for the safety of Harold, and still more hopeless of his freedom. His own apprehensions were also great and while he remained there he had laid various plans for securing his escape; but the wily Norman so closely watched him that he could not succeed. He had however resolved to fly into Brittany at all hazards; and it was while preparing for his reception there, that William seeing there was no middle way between putting him to death and letting him return to England, resolved upon the latter as being the most politic.

Happy was Editha now. Harold was high in favour with the king, and his popularity beyond that of all rivals. Edward feared him as too potent for a subject, yet loved him. Alfnoth also was much esteemed by the monarch, and there seemed to be now no obstacle to her union with Harold. In this happiness of mind Editha retired to rest.

She rose next morning blooming, and refreshed by an unwonted sleep, her full beauty restored.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Tostig tosses his head on high,
Harold is just and says, Oh, fie!
This Tostig cannot at all deny,
And is forced to lay his dukedom by.

THE next day dawned upon the preparations made in the three camps for the decision of Harold, upon the disputes between the powerful duke Tostig and the insurgent Northumbrians. The judgment-seat of Harold was made of turf, erected in the midst of his camp, and on both sides of him were lower seats, made in the same manner, forming a semicircle on either hand: on these sat his thanes, and close behind them large columns of his troops stood under arms: these were his main battle, while to the right and left his wings of cavalry, in lines, stretched far their imposing array. Two strong detachments of horse were advanced close to the camps of Tostig and the Northumbrians, with orders to cut any man to pieces who dared to approach the camp of Harold, or quit the precincts of his own. These detachments again set forth small patrols, which rode continually round the rival camps, in which all standards were ordered to be cast down: Alfnoth, who resided in a castle belonging to the king, alone hoisted the royal standard, but Harold sent to it a garrison of his own soldiers.

These arrangements being made, the great earl gave the signal for Tostig and the Northumbrian deputies to come to his camp, unarmed, and escorted by his own troops. Each of the adverse parties was to consist of a hundred men only.

With Duke Tostig came his own vassals and courtiers, all in armour, but bare-headed, and bearing neither shield nor spear, nor sword nor battle-axe.

With the Northumbrian chiefs, Morcar and Edwin, who were also in armour, came the leading thanes of the kingdom of Northumbria, including those of Cumbria and Mercia, which had also suffered grievously from the duke's barbarity.

Digitized by Google

With these came some Welsh chiefs, for they too had experienced the ruthless Tostig's outrages: all these men were weaponless.

Earl Harold issued from his pavilion clothed in complete armour, his helmet on his head. Behind him came the bearers of his battle-axe and his shield. On his thigh was girded the celebrated seax. He proceeded at once to his seat, while all the warlike music of the army sent forth a loud salute, and the general clash of arms expressed the affection and discipline of his troops. The well-known sounds were heard in the hostile camps, and the congratulatory shout was re-echoed from both. Editha from her tower heard and saw all, and the emotion produced by the popular affection for her lover was overpowering—she burst into a flood of unrestrained tears.

"And this hero, this idol of the brave Saxons, this warrior whom they all love, is mine!" exclaimed she, as she clasped her hands together and fell on her knees in gratitude for the happiness she felt. It was pure, unalloyed joy; for she knew him to be as good as he was great, and she also knew that his heart was all her own,—that she had there no rival but the Saxon people. The shouts which had erst reverberated from hill to hill were now succeeded by a dead silence. Editha arose, and from her latticed casement she saw all that passed.

The sun shone full upon Harold, whose prominent seat, bright armour, and commanding stature, rendered him distinct from the crowd. On his right sat Alfnoth; before him at some distance, and rather to the left, stood Morcar in front of his followers. Opposed to Morcar was the fierce Tostig—tall, gaunt, and imperious in his demeanour.

"Harold!" cried the insolent duke in a loud voice—"I stand not here before you, or any ealdorman or thane, but in presence of the king's delegate, to claim his justice upon rebels to his and my authority."

"Duke Tostig," answered Harold calmly, but with a stern countenance—"as a brother I counsel ye to be patient. I claim no rule or superiority over you as lord of the kingdom of Northumberland: I am not here as Harold, but as the king's lieutenant. My rule is in the south; it is vast and

Digitized by Google

potent as your own; but we border not on each other, nor is there cause of feud between us. Be patient then good brother, and let justice take its course; let the king's authothority be respected, not provoked, for it is too powerful now to be insulted with impunity. I have both the will and the means to make it respected."

At this reproof Tostig remained silent; but the workings of his visage showed the violent passions which stirred within him."

"Earl Morcar!" demanded Harold, in a loud and clear voice—"in the name of the good King Edward, our liege lord, ye come here before me, the representative and gesith of the king. Now I demand if ye come furnished with accusations and proofs against Tostig, the liege lord and duke of Northumbria, against whom ye have rebelled for alleged tyranny and misrule?"

Ere Earl Morcar could reply, Tostig exclaimed violently—

"And where is your authority Earl Harold? How know I that the king gave you the right to judge?"

"Forty thousand authorities stand around me in arms, good brother! 'Twere better thou wert silent, and not demand that they produce their credentials! Remember those dread words, '*Nemeth yure seax!*' and be silent, or your camp yonder may be swept away in an instant! Thou knowest, Tostig, the fate of Semele when she desired Jupiter to appear in all his splendour! Let the moral of the fable be impressed upon you. Be wise then, and obedient!"

Tostig was brave was powerful but he was not deficient in wisdom, and felt that now, as at all times, he was unable to cope with Harold; he therefore remained silent. Harold's fierce eyes were bent with a look that warned him not to rouse the generous lion to anger: and the terror of the north quailed under the stern gaze of the hero.

"Then," said Earl Morcar, "I am well known to you and to many thanes present in this great army great Harold, and before I say aught against Earl Tostig, I will call upon any thirty among the thanes of the Saxon realm now present in thine army, to be my compurgators. Let Earl Tostig name half of their number, if so ye will it, and thou, O great Earl Harold! name the other half."

Digitized by Google

Upon these words being uttered Tostig seemed unable to contain his fury.

"Accursed be ye traitor, and accursed be thy compurgators!"

"Silence I say! Let the compurgators be named!" cried Harold, in a voice of thunder.

Tostig consulted with his followers, and named fifteen thanes then present; while Alfnoth, to whom Harold confided the power to name the remainder, selected also fifteen.

"Thanes!" said Harold, "do ye believe the oath of Earl Morcar to be upright and clear?"

"We well know Earl Morcar," answered they, "we believe his oath to be upright and clear, and that he is a true man." The thanes then returned to their seats, and Morcar resumed his address.

"I swear!" said he, "that we who are before thy throne, great earl, are faithful and obedient vassals of the good King Edward, whose sway we reverence and uphold; but Duke Tostig has done such wrong to those over whom he rules, that it can no longer be borne by men and warriors. Innocent men, from the thane to the serf, have been put to death with tortures unheard-of before in Northumbria and the surrounding territories; and for what?—refusing their riches, their wives and their daughters, to that tyrant who now stands in thy presence. We have held folkmotes in the camp; I speak the accusations of the people, as delivered by them to the thanes and earls and ceorls who now surround me, and who are ready to prove the same by trials of witnesses, of fire, of water, or, if so the king wills it, of arms."

"We are ready for these proofs before God and before thee!" exclaimed the chiefs who attended Earl Morcar, stretching their hands towards heaven.

"There are thousands, my lord Harold, in that army," and Morcar pointed to his own camp, "who have suffered mutilation by torture at the hands of Earl Tostig; who have lost dishonoured wives and daughters, first taken, and afterwards privately destroyed by Earl Tostig; who have been dispossessed of the ancient holdings of their families by Earl Tostig; and they are finally resolved as one man to

Digitized by Google

fall in fight where you now see them stand, ere they will again submit to the rule of that cruel and abandoned chief, who respects no right of birth, of law, or of nature. The throne, great earl, is supported by three pillars: the priest, the warrior, and the labourer who tills the soil. All three have been broken by Tostig: in us you behold the ruins. To banish this curse upon the throne and upon ourselves is our resolve."

"Yes, yes, we are resolved!" shouted the deputies with a fierce voice, as they raised their clenched fists towards Tostig.

"Duke Tostig," said Harold with calm dignity, "what answer do you make?"

"Scorn and contempt!" replied Tostig haughtily; "their assertions are, as the assertions of traitors and rebels always are, false as hell!"

"We are no traitors, most insolent earl!" said Morcar; "we are injured men who call aloud for justice, and because we received none at your hands we have taken arms for our defence, and to chastise thee as thou dost deserve. And be assured, most excellent Harold," continued Morcar, as he turned towards the lieutenant of the king—"be assured that we are liege subjects who abide the king's will in this as in all things, if he will do us justice; if not, then let our swords defend us, for to them we will alone trust."

"To them we will trust," said the deputies, repeating the words of their leader in solemn tones, as each man folded his arms across his breast.

"I am now ready to swear to all I have deposed," resumed Morcar.

"This is the sacred ring of Odin!" said Harold, as he drew from his finger a brazen ring of a polygonal shape, each side having a Runic character engraven upon it—"and here are the Evangelists and the holy cross. Wilt thou swear upon these that all thou hast uttered is truth?"

"As I hope for mercy above, and the sacred priests tell us we may so hope, I kiss the book and the holy rood; and if, as our ancestors and many now alive believe, we go to the halls of Odin after a brave death, I swear upon the sacred ring of the god of battles that all I have spoken is sooth."

Digitized by Google

"We swear, and we kiss the ring and the book, and the holy rood of Christ!" cried the companions of Morcar, as they pressed forward,—"and we await the ordeals by fire, water, and battle, if the king wills it."

"Curse ye all, and your ordeals with ye!" vociferated Tostig, as he rushed upon Morcar, and was followed by his people; but Morcar, a brave and strong earl, cast him to the ground with violence. Harold ordered his guards to separate the two hostile parties.

"March them prisoners to their camps," he cried in a peremptory voice. "Tostig, this is not well: ye have made no defence against strong accusations. I will report the whole to the king, and I wot he will displace one so unfit to rule over the great kingdom of Northumbria. Away with ye to your camps! and ere ye depart, hear my commands. If either party commit any hostile act I will destroy the offender! Away I say, and obey my orders!"

The meeting thus closed; but when the party of Harold's vassals who guarded Tostig to his camp arrived there, the cruel duke, whose ferocity was ever on the alert to commit a wanton action invited them with traitorous intent to sup in his camp at nightfall, as if to show that he felt no anger. A number of Harold's people accepted the invitation, as there had been frequent communication between the camps among acquaintances, who passed from one to another unarmed: hence heedless of danger, they returned from their own camp about dark. Tostig received them in person.

"Now comrades! ye kindly guarded me to my camp this morning, and Tostig is ever generous to those beneath him in rank—nor can the insolent conduct of his imperious brother render him unjust towards the soldiers of King Edward, his liege lord. Enter this banqueting-tent."

The men entered the large tent with Tostig, who took his place at the top of the board.

"What, ho there!" cried he, clapping his hands thrice; "serve in the meats to my hungry guests!"

Instantly the side walls of the tent fell and armed men appeared, two behind each vassal of Earl Harold, and seizing each unprepared wretch by the hair, despatched him at once. Around the tent stood tubs, or barrels; and Tostig,

Digitized by Google

having made his armed vassals cut the bodies in pieces, ordered them to be packed in the barrels, and directed to Earl Harold.

Having committed this cruelty, he left the barrels standing, and silently decamped in the darkness of the night, desiring his men to disperse, himself gaining the coast with such followers as he wished to have, together with much treasure which he had previously embarked: he then made sail for Flanders, and arrived safe at Bruges, where Earl Baldwin, his father-in-law, then held his court—Tostig had married the sister of Matilda duchess of Normandy.

When this horrible transaction was communicated to Harold, he ordered his cavalry to pursue the fugitives, resolved to punish such conduct if he could arrest his brother; but reports, which came in thick from all parts, satisfied him that Tostig had disbanded his troops and fled to Flanders.

When Tostig's cruel conduct was made known to King Edward, he resolved to appoint the brave Earl Morcar in his stead. Harold obeying the king's commands to that effect, drew out the two armies, and in their presence proclaimed that earl duke of Northumbria. Morcar was received with loud acclamations by the Northumbrians, and Harold, seizing such of the treasures as Tostig had been unable to carry off, and receiving payment from Morcar for those castles which were the private property of the fugitive, collected a large booty and divided it among the soldiers of his army, which he then disbanded. The insurgents broke up likewise, and wended to their respective homes, spreading temporary consternation on their lines of march; for hosts of armed men who draw the sword for right seldom sheath it without wrong, Nature having decreed that there shall be no good without its attendant evil. The DEITY and the DEVIL appear in all things!

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXXV.

Harold says Alfnoth I must reign,
Alfnoth answers that is not plain,
But Harold talks so well and fast,
That Alfnoth is convinced at last.

"ALFNOTH there is now no difficulty as to my nuptials with Editha."

"Except your being affianced to that ancient Norman princess, Harold, daughter of Duke William!"

"Yea, yea, verily! I forgot her and my promise too," said Harold laughing; "yet I will not be a perjured knight, I will marry her when her father is bretwalder of the Saxons, if she will have me; but when I took leave of her the other day in her cradle, the maiden cried, in evident disapprobation of my courtship."

"Even so let it be" answered Alfnoth. "But consult Editha."

"Most excellent Childe of Sussex, thou art wise in thy generation. Editha and I have done little else than consult, if so it can be called where only one opinion is listened to! Her only difficulty is that of leaving you alone: she says your health has been injured by your wounds."

"My health is good enough" interrupted the Childe; "and we shall never be longer asunder, for I imagine, Earl Harold, that your attendance on the declining king will be constant." As Alfnoth spoke, a smile, half joking but sarcastic, played around his mouth, and he glanced obliquely towards Harold.

"Childe of Sussex," replied Harold gravely, "we may not play with edged tools lightly; but from the father of Editha no secrets of mine shall be withheld. I know you to be a true and honourable Saxon chief; and though once my enemy, that time is past, gone, forgotten. Hearken now unto me: if Edward dies soon, as all things seem to an-

Digitized by Google

nounce, the Norman claims the throne. He is rich, powerful, brave, politic, and the ablest warrior I have seen; what his resources are can only be told when he calls them forth. His people are warlike, and the plunder of England is enough to tempt the avarice of any nation; the plunderers, however numerous, will be few compared to the pillage. Aged warriors and gownsmen join those who seek glory in the conquest of this land, where money awaits the old, beautiful women and power attend the young. The result of all this no man can calculate. But I have well studied the resources of Normandy, they are vast; and though sadly ravaged by the count of Anjou, his passage through Neustria was so quick, and the riches of the land so well concealed, that the mischief he did on the whole was small; much, also, was retaken at Varaville, and very soon the country recovered from his depredations. Well now, good Childe of Sussex, tell me thy thoughts frankly. Think you that these Norman youths coming on a venture; think you that the more aged avaricious speculators—think you, I say, that the wild bands that the one leads and the other hires will come to rule us Saxons with the silken bonds of Edward's mild laws? Will not our lands be divided, our castles taken, ourselves destroyed, our women dishonoured?

"And from contemplating our own fate let us look at that which will await the poorer Saxons. The most miserable men have something to lose—that something is their all; in it they find whatever life has of comfort for them. You have your castles, your vassals have their houses, your serfs have their cabins and your protection: their cabins are poor and lowly, but they who inhabit them have abundant food and raiment, and the hardest-hearted chief is brought up among them. He has a feeling in common with his vassals, and though great cruelties are too often inflicted upon our serfs, there is a limit beyond which, if he pushes injustice, the whole country cry out, and often rise to check; for being all countrymen, we have ties too strong for the courage of the boldest thane in England to break. Behold my brutal brother Tostig! he drew the bow too tight, and it snapped asunder in his hands. Then we have good laws; and those laws all men have for ages been accustomed to, and willingly obey: we

Digitized by Google

are still the children of the great Alfred. Yes Alfnoth, the Saxon peasant, even to the lowest and most miserable serf, has protection and comfort. But let the Norman come, let him ascend the throne in peace: will he come alone—will he trust the Saxons without an army? Must not that army be paid and fed? and will Norman citizens lend money without interest? Assuredly not! Will the Norman barons who lead that army be content to dance attendance on King William in peace and in poverty, while you and I, and the class to which we belong, live in riches and magnificence in our castles? Have you not seen how they despise us? Were we not obliged to drive them hence for their insolence and avarice, even when here under sufferance by the weakness of our good Edward—a king of our own race?

"Noble Childe of Sussex, look on this terrible picture! Imagine your family ruined, dishonoured; Editha torn from us both by some accursed Norman baron, to serve his base passions for awhile, and then cast forth to his followers to live in misery till death shall relieve her! Ourselves possibly worked in chains that we might behold her sufferings—working as slaves in our own castles and on our own lands! Look upon this picture, and know that it would be but an epitome of the whole Saxon nation and the just punishment of our infamy and cowardice if we submit to foreign rule. Now Alfnoth, are you prepared to receive the Norman for your king?"

"Truly," replied Alfnoth, "I did not formerly contemplate the Norman rule when I so erroneously took part with the Norman favourites of the good Edward against your father, Earl Godwin."

"Speak not of the past, good earl," said Harold, "those sad times are by-gone; we were not altogether faultless ourselves in what we did. My great father was sadly harassed; both Tostig and Sweyn were ever compromising our family by inexcusable deeds of violence."

"Well! well!" continued the Childe, "I repent me of my blindness, and I am wholly of your mind great earl, that no Norman can rule in England."

"No!" said Harold, "impossible! without the total destruction of our noble country. But this picture is not

Digitized by Google

the worst; the people will resist. The first violence committed by a Norman chief will be avenged by the people, as was the case at Dover against the king's brother-in-law, Eustace of Boulogne. Then will some of our Saxon nobles take part with the people, some Norman baron will naturally join his companions, and civil war, if civil war you choose to name it, will rage throughout the land,—Norman against Saxon, and to the great disadvantage of the latter, because, before we quarrel we shall have placed the Norman in full possession of power; we shall have armed our enemy with weapons which we cannot resist, and the Saxon name and race will be a byword for disgrace and wretchedness."

"By Odin god of battle! this shall never be," exclaimed Alfnoth—"rather let the land run rivers of blood, than the Norman should put his foot on our shores."

"But then sir Childe, tell me what ye will do? Edward is close upon the grave; the queen tells me she expects his death every moment; he may live a few months, he may pass away in a few hours."

"I see what must be done Earl Harold; we must have a Saxon king."

"And who shall that Saxon be? Will you oppose the imbecile Edgar Atheling to the great duke of Normandy? Will you array folly and cowardice against wisdom and courage, and then put your destinies upon the cast of the battle?"

"It cannot be!" replied Alfnoth.

"Then Alfnoth condemn me not when I tell you what must be done," said Harold, bending his look fixedly upon the Childe, "you must elect me king!"

Here Alfnoth started.

"Nay! start not but hear me! I am the most powerful thane in the realm; I am the most popular also. I am the most experienced in war and in government, I have ever been successful in war. If I hoist my banner no armed man in England would hesitate to serve under it: it has ever been the standard of victory. In all Europe, William of Normandy alone is my rival in war; and I alone am deemed equal to oppose him. Though inferior to him in

Digitized by Google

stature, his very Normans considered me his match in single combat: as a general I think they had more confidence in me than in him. Now Alfnoth, I ask you, who is to mount the throne in preference to Harold?"

"No one Harold deserves it more; but Edgar Atheling is of the blood of Cerdic, and the people look much to that."

"And is it fitting, Earl Alfnoth, that we who rule this realm should sacrifice the people to a silly fancy confined to a few weak ignorant people? for among the Saxons, as you well know, our law does not deem hereditary descent necessary when strong objections are opposed to it. Let us give the Atheling happiness, and do him all honour, let riches and rank be his; but let us not destroy both him and the nation, that for a few short weeks he may be called king: beyond that time he would not survive. William would soon send him to his ancestors, or place him in the low state where nature intended him to be."

"True, true," said Alfnoth; "but will the thanes of the kingdom consent?"

"Yea, all, to a man. If you and your sons, the earls Morcar and Edwin, join myself and my brothers Gurth and Leofwin, who shall say us nay? Besides I have numbers of lesser thanes that are all devoted to me, that have wished me to dethrone Edward (which Heaven forfend). These are ready to stand by my side, and the poorer portion of the Saxon people are one and all devoted to me as you well know."

"I am convinced," exclaimed Alfnoth; "but one more difficulty—your oath?"

"Alfnoth, ye are not now going to play the shaveling with me!" said Harold, laughing. "What have I sworn? to assist the Norman king! Why, ay, and so I will, when he *is* king; but as I leave my sister Editha to watch that the love of his dear Norman cousin does not make Edward bequeath the crown to the stranger, so will I leave my beautiful bride Editha to convince you that Harold forfeits no promise, unless Edward bequeaths the throne to William—and even then 'twill be but the breaking of an oath forced from a prisoner!"

"But the relics Harold?" added Alfnoth, with a seriousness which made Harold again burst out laughing.

Digitized by Google

"Ha, ha, ha! the old bones! Oh! by the rood! I forgot them. But tell me good Alfnoth, what proof have we that those were really the saint's bones, or those of some honest squeaking Norman pig killed for the occasion by a roguish priest like Odo; or formerly, for some similar rascally purpose of cheating honest men out of their rights? There was the ear of the high-priest's servant cut off by Saint Peter! ay, so they said: but I saw a poor Jew's ears cut off not long before by order of the duke, because he refused to lend money, and I expect one of his ears was borrowed for the nonce. Nay, nay, good and valiant Alfnoth, when a nation's safety is upon the die, we must not let such priest-craft cheat us to sacrifice what God has entrusted to our care. Moreover, I knew not the relics were there, and therefore did not swear upon them. Away with such nonsense! I would as soon listen to that crazy dame the Vala, who never did any good till my sweet Editha put brains into her for our release, which was chiefly owing to your daughter. At all events let the worst come to the worst, and that it was the real, true, original ear of the ancient Jew who served Caiaphas for money, instead of the modern Jew who would not serve William with money, yet even then Stigand shall absolve me of my oath.

"Mark ye well, too, good Alfnoth, that our late host, the young Norman duke, is not often cruel but for money; all his rage and vengeance takes that turn; he never omits to fill his coffers, and as to expending, why I have seen him turn a golden byzant over and over, till it almost rubbed the skin off his finger ere he gave it away. But he gives generously when his success depends upon his generosity; that is what I most fear: he is full of wisdom and valour. Curse him, I wish he was drinking beer in Asgaard, with his grandsire Rollo! Yet if he would leave England alone I could honour and love him beyond all men, for he is a great sovereign and worthy the friendship of Harold. Alas!" continued he, sighing, "that he should resolve to ruin the Saxons; for he well knows to what miseries he dooms our nation if he ever ascends the throne. He told me he would bring no Normans with him. I could have told him that the Saxons would in that case soon send him back to fetch them! but he knows

Digitized by Google

this as well as I do, and a hundred thousand merciless strangers will be upon us the day he is crowned."

Editha now entered the apartment, and Harold turning towards her continued, "I have your father's consent, Editha, to make you my wife forthwith, and as these times are full charged with events, we must be quick. Let us then celebrate our nuptials at Winchester when I return to London, for there my presence is now essential to those projects I have formed for the safety of the Saxons."

"Even as ye will, father and husband; for from one to whom my heart is given my hand shall not be withheld."

"So be it," said Alfnoth.

Harold established the new duke of Northumbria firmly in possession of the country, and then departed for London, where his presence was rendered necessary by the king's weak state, and it was also necessary that he should be present at the dedication of the new abbey at Westminster.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

King Edward lays him down to die,
The thanes and bishops standing by,
He asks for quiet, they pull him about,
Till he calls Harold king, and the people shout.

The time Harold passed in London was one of constant festivities, for the Saxons keep their Christmas with great hospitality. Editha had no rival in beauty among the ladies of the Saxon court. With her fierce and learned namesake, Queen Editha, she had but little intercourse, beyond that of public duty to her sister-in-law and sovereign. The latter possessed all the ferocity of Earl Godwin her father, and Editha's gentle and well-poised mind could ill conceal her disgust at the bloody deeds of her relation, whose nature seemed more akin to her brother Tostig than to that of the generous Harold. She was nevertheless a woman of uncommon piety; and as it was convenient to her temporal interests privately to commit a few murders, so it was in-

Digitized by Google

cumbent upon her to balance accounts by a due attention to the Church. She therefore took the sick king's place at the ceremony of dedicating the new church of St. Peter, and superintended the necessary decorations of that magnificent structure; the stones for building which were as thou well knowest, Robert Wace, taken from our good quarries here at Caen.

The people were sad and sorrowful when they saw that their beloved king could not attend the ceremony. It grieved them that he through whose economy and virtue this holy and beautiful sanctuary was raised should be absent. The queen, great and powerful as she was, and also of great beauty, did not recompense them for the absence of their sick sovereign.

Editha was beheld with pleasure—she was the expected queen; young, innocent, and radiant with loveliness and dignity, her gentle and modest manners well became her, and gained her the affections of the nobility as well as of those whose fates were more humble.

A day or two after the consecration of Westminister Abbey, the king's death was evidently approaching. The thanes and bishops of the realm surrounded his couch, all except Earl Harold, who, in his own castle, awaited the declaration of the monarch's mind as to the succession. The earl was also surrounded by the citizens of London in arms, while a large body of his own guards were in readiness, as he proclaimed his resolution to fulfil the testament of the dying king. Queen Editha stood with the archbishops Stigand and Alfred; earls Morcar, Edwin, Alfnoth, Gurth, Leofwin, and others were close around the bed.

"Sire," said Stigand, "to whom dost thou bequeath the Saxon crown?"

The king made no answer; an intense silence reigned throughout the chamber.

"In the name of the Saviour of the world, speak!" said Alfred, as he raised the crucifix before the glassy eyes of the expiring man.

"Is William of Normandy here?" asked the king faintly.

"No my liege."

Digitized by Google

"Is he aware of my danger?—he ought to be here."

"Notice was sent to him by your orders, but as yet the messenger could scarcely have reached Lillebonne," answered one of the thanes.

"Alas, alas!" sighed Edward; "would he were here."

"He is not here," remarked Stigand; "and I fear your liege must prepare for an immortal crown, and receive extreme unction."

"Let it be administered," quoth the monarch.

"Yea, verily, most excellent king! but thy soul cannot depart in peace from this mortal life till thy high duties are fulfilled: let worldly preparation be made, and so will thy road be clear to heaven. The thanes of thy kingdom await thy fiat for the temporal good of this realm—name thy successor in this presence, O king! Let thy thanes depart, and we, the ministers of the true faith, will abide by thee even to the last."

"Is the Atheling here?—his blood is pure."

"He shall be sent for," answered the archbishop of York; "but, my lord, the thanes of this great kingdom will hardly be ruled by one so young and feeble. If the Norman comes, how shall he be withstood?"

"Then let the Norman come, and not be withstood," replied the king.

"My liege, the Saxons will never submit to the rule of the stranger."

"By our Lady! but ye torment me. In God's name, what would ye I should do? Let me die in peace, I beseech ye!"

"My lord the king knows that a successor must be appointed. The Saxons are for Harold—the thanes are for Harold."

"Consult among yourselves, and tell me who is most worthy of the crown."

Hardly had he said these words, when a confused murmur arose among the lords spiritual and temporal assembled: the word "Harold" was heard, and the queen stooping over the king said, "They call upon Earl Harold: he alone can hold and bind them; 'twere best that you bequeath to him the

Digitized by Google

crown, or the kingdom will be deluged with blood. In the name of our blessed Lady, name my brother."

"Be it as ye will!" answered Edward in a voice hardly audible: then receiving the sacrament he expired.

Hardly had the words passed his lips when the thanes, who by reason of his feebleness could not hear the king's words, demanded eagerly, "What says he?" Editha, turning to the assembly, answered aloud,

"My lords, he appoints the Earl Harold to be king." The thanes quitted the room; the news spread like lightning along the streets, and "Long live Harold the king of the Saxons!" resounded through the city.

Harold heard the shout; nature had cast him in a monarch's mould, and at once he assumed the Saxon diadem. The shouts which told him he was king of England had not ceased when he ordered the Wittenagemote to assemble and confirm the last will of Edward, or give the crown to another as seemed fitting.

All the great men of the kingdom had been assembled to witness the dedication of the new church of St. Peter, and the council of the nation was easily assembled within an hour after Edward's death.

"My lords," said Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury, who though he had been suspended by the Pope, nevertheless officiated, and in fact ruled the whole of the clergy: "My lords, the late king, as most of your lordships heard, has named Earl Harold to be his successor to the Saxon crown; but the earl, exercising all that moderation which, as your lordships well know, is his peculiar characteristic, has refused to accept the supreme rule unless sanctioned by this great assembly. I am therefore desired to learn your decision, and to request that you will instantly declare whether or not you are pleased to confirm the will of King Edward, or to render it invalid. For my part," continued the archbishop, "my mind is made up to declare Harold king of England; our deceased monarch so willed it to save the kingdom from bloodshed and from strife; and Heaven forbid that I, a minister of peace, should raise my voice against the law of this land which gives power to the king to name his successor. No

Digitized by Google

my lords! to do so would be to forfeit my character as a minister of the holy word.

"But my lords, it may be said that the poor youth Edgar the Atheling has by blood a just and lineal right of inheritance to the crown as being of the race of Cerdic. It is most true that the claim of this poor youth is strong in point of lineage, and to him Harold has directed me to say, that he will make over the crown, if so it should appear just and profitable to this kingdom, and be your lordships' opinion and pleasure; but, I for one, humble and insignificant as I am—a man of peace and a poor preacher of the faith, far removed from all care or thought for political influence or temporal affairs"—here the archbishop bowed, and with hands folded across his bosom cast his eyes meekly to the ground; but as he stooped his mitre fell from his head upon the pavement with a startling rattle!

Part of the assembly were struck with awe at this inauspicious omen; the lighter, possibly the wiser part, were inclined to laugh at the consequence which resulted from this negation of all worldly objects, this humility, so strongly claimed by the proud prelate; and with a ready wit he seized the accident, "Behold!" he exclaimed, "the divine confirmation of my humility! there let that sacred diadem lie; the true mitre is seated in the heart of humbleness and humility, which is too lowly to fall, and cannot be suspended" (alluding to his suspension by the pontiff) "There, I say, let the proud mitre of Canterbury lie till our holy father be pleased again to place it on my unworthy brow." Here the prelate drew himself up, erect, proud, and haughty, with a flushed and fiery look that seemed to bid defiance alike to the pope and to the assembly.

"But to return to the high subject of my discourse. I, for one, my lords, would not risk the life and safety of the youth in question by giving to him a momentary crown, nor would I endanger the realm by such a weakness. No! if your lordships reject the great, the virtuous, the warlike Harold, already a monarch in name, in nature, and in power, unrivalled by any Saxon thane—if you reject *him*, then I say, give the crown to the Norman at once. For better it is, far better for the Saxon people, that Duke

Digitized by Google

William should peaceably ascend the throne by your unanimous vote, than seize it by the sword, overthrowing a feeble youth in the first combat.

"But my lords, let William come, if so ye will it should be, I have no worldly interests, my kingdom is the Lord's glory, whose servant I am: let Robert the monk of Jumieges return to Canterbury, let him pick up that bauble at my feet,"—here the archbishop kicked the mitre scornfully with his foot—"let Eustace of Boulogne return, with all his insolent vassals, to rob the land and murder more Saxons at Dover; let the barons of Normandy come with their duke and take the lion's share of this poor realm, if so your lordships will that it should be! Earl Harold will not again take up arms to defend you, he will again retire to his rich territories; he will no longer oppose the rampant rules of the Norman barons, as when he knew they were brought here by the favour and weakness of our late lord the king, of blessed memory—peace be to his soul! They were then intruders against the will of the high thanes whom I now have the honour to address, and of the Saxon people. Yet, if ye will it that they should return to devour this unhappy land, then, my lords, the case will be altered, and Earl Harold submits to the will and pleasure of the Saxon people. But, if ye value the honour of your women, the possession of your estates, and your personal freedom, give not the crown to the revengeful Normans whom ye once chased from this realm; give the crown to Harold who can defend the kingdom; or, pass by young Edgar, save his life, prevent a war, and give the crown to Duke William at once. What did I say? Prevent a war! Oh no! there must be war in all cases; for think ye, thanes, the Saxons will bear the insolent oppression of the Norman barons? Will ye bear it yourselves? No! I will not insult you by the supposition; and I call upon you to choose the greatest warrior of the time, he who above all men can lead ye to battle, and protect the Saxons by force of arms from the invading strangers; the man to whom the good King Edward confided the safety of the kingdom. Decide thanes for Harold, or basely bow to the Norman yoke!"

No sooner had the prelate finished this address, than the

Digitized by Google

unanimous cry of "Let Harold be king!" resounded from all parts of the assembly—the thanes clashing their arms in approbation. In the confusion the archbishop, replacing his mitre on his head, cried with a loud voice—"Saxons, follow me to the king!" and putting himself at their head, proceeded to the palace, where Harold clad in complete armour awaited their decision.

He stood in the front of the throne of Edward, and on approaching him, the archbishop, raising his arms aloft, cried out "*Liever kyning wass heal!*" The salutation was repeated by the thanes within, and passed to the shouting crowds without the palace, till mixed with the din of clashing arms the very welkin resounded with the tumult of joy expressed by the Saxon people at the election of their popular chief; a joy which clearly pointed out to the enemies of the new king, how fruitless it would be to oppose the crowning of the great Earl.

When the tumult subsided, Harold mounted the steps, and seated himself on the throne, and again the acclamations of the assembly reverberated through the city.

"Prelates! earls! people of every degree!" cried the son of Godwin with a loud voice, "I, Harold the king, summon ye to attend me on the morrow at Westminster Abbey, where I will receive the crown from Alfred, archbishop of York. Now disperse!" With loud hurras the crowd melted away.

The morrow came, the abbey was filled with the subjects of Harold, and when the religious rites were performed, the archbishop of York advanced towards the new monarch; the prelate held the crown in both hands, but ere he could speak, Harold took the diadem and, majestically placing it on his head, cried aloud:

"By the will of God, of king Edward, and of the Saxons!"

A shout of exultation rolled through the vaulted roof of the abbey, which shook with the crashing sound, and King Harold, followed by his armed thanes and clergy, proceeded to the palace.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Tostig comes with his boots all muddy,
To put Duke William in a brown study.
Then straightway Taillefer the brave,
Is sent to call King Harold a knave.
Taillefer is both brave and strong,
Rides right well, and sings a good song,
Drinks like a fish with all that are dry,
And thinks himself good company.

It is now time that I should return to Normandy, and record the proceedings of our great duke, said Sir William Mallet. Young sir, those were such times that the like will never be seen again. Oh! that glorious conquest! and the stirring scenes which preceded it!

It was on a fine frosty morning in January, the year of our blessed Redeemer one thousand and sixty-six, that Duke William was shooting in the forest of Rouvroy, not far from the city of Rouen. The leafless trees were hung with icicles which sparkled in the sun, their feathery branches pencilled with light flakes of snow; it was a forest of silver tracery bedecked with pendulous diamonds, beautiful to man, but the plaintive songs of famishing birds spoke their desolation and misery.

The strong archer strode cautiously along, and his piercing glance examined each thicket as he approached it, for his game was the rude bear, the fierce wild boar, and the famishing wolf. While thus slowly advancing through the woods, he heard the rapid, heavy tread of a horse in full gallop: looking in the direction of the sound, he saw a horseman, who approached, and leaping lightly from his charger bent his knee before the duke, exclaiming,—

"All hail William, king of England! Edward is dead, and I am the first to bring the glad tidings to my liege lord and to offer my services against the perjured Harold, who

Digitized by Google

has been proclaimed king against the wishes of the Saxon thanes; for they know King Edward declared the duke of Normandy heir to the Saxon realm."

"And is it then true that Edward is dead?" asked the duke with an air of surprise.

"Most true," replied Tostig, for it was he.

William did not utter another word; giving his bow and arrows to the attendant, he mounted a horse with which his javelin-bearer attended. Slowly and silently he rode towards Rouen, and betook himself to his chamber. There, resting his face upon his hands, he remained in silent meditation. After a while he arose, and paced up and down in great agitation, stamping with rage, and sometimes seating himself on one bench sometimes on another. His attendants held aloof, but at last William Fitzosborne addressed him in the following words:—

"Sire! why conceal the news which so afflicts your mind? If it be that King Edward of England is dead, and that Earl Harold, falsifying his oath made to you, has seized the crown,—know, sire, that the whole town of Rouen is aware of it."

"It is most true" replied William, "the death of the good King Edward and the wrong done me by Earl Harold hang heavily upon my heart."

"Sire, there are two evils which ought never to afflict us: the one is that which cannot be cured, the other is that which may be repaired. The death of King Edward is irreparable, and to grieve for it is idle: the wrongs done by Earl Harold may be repaired; a right and bold proceeding on your part is all that is necessary to destroy him. You have plenty of experienced soldiers ready to obey you in all things; there is nothing wanted but a good resolution. That which is well begun is half done." Duke William was pleased to see this readiness for war exhibited by one of his chief followers.

"Thou art right Fitzosborne; but think you that this same brave spirit of yours reigns through all my barons? And then the notables of Normandy! will the knaves find money for my wants? I fear me they will not. But, by the splendour of God! the English throne is worth striving

Digitized by Google

for. The first step is to send Taillefer as my ambassador to England: I will demand of Harold that he should keep to his oath, and to his promises."

Taillefer was soon prepared: he was one of those young and joyous soldiers who make the best knights. At a moment's warning he was ready for a march or a battle. He had no cares in this world; his whole family were assembled under his helmet when he armed for the field. Of huge stature, great strength, and uncommon agility, he would, when completely armed, spring from his horse in full career, keep pace with it awhile and then leap again on his charger: often would he stand upon the saddle in full gallop, and cast his spear at the enemy from that height; and always when his mind was occupied he would discharge his thoughts in a verse of some old roundelay. The duke of Normandy had great confidence in the good sense as well as in the courage and fidelity of Taillefer, and having explained to him his embassy, ordered him to depart at once.

"I never take above a year, sire, to get ready myself; but let my poor beast finish his oats. I would not, for the honour of Normandy, that he went among those guzzling Saxons without his dinner; the rogues have no respect for a hungry belly in man or horse."

"Let him feed Taillefer," said William laughing; "if you are off to-morrow morning, it will do."

"Very well sire; but——"

"But what?" said the duke impatiently. "I hate *buts*."

"So do I sire! but if I am not to go till to-morrow morning, what, in the devil's name, am I to do with myself all to-day?"

"Why," answered William smiling, "think how sick you will be at sea to-morrow!"

"No, I will think of those pretty Saxon damsels, and of picking out one for my share of the booty, when we go to loggerheads with Harold."

"I think Harold will hold by his oath, after all," observed William.

"Then sire, your thoughts are more wide of the mark than your lance ever was. That fellow Harold will fight

Digitized by Google

while there is a battle-axe in England, and a Norman skull to be split."

"I will offer mine to his curtle-axe, if he likes a single combat," answered William.

"He will not do that; but if he meets you in the fray, he won't turn back; and you will be nearer your match than ever you were in your life sire. I tried to wrestle with him one day, and there was Mallet and Auvrai Gigaut, and he threw us all, one after another, like children; and yet we were not babes I trow;" and Taillefer laughed as he looked at his own stalwart limbs. "Certes his might was great; we wished you had been there to avenge the Norman honour."

"I know his strength and wonderful agility," said William; "do you remember how he singly bore three knights in full armour out of the moving sands, when we were nearly lost at Mount St. Michael? I honour him above all men, by the rood! but if I can bring it about, Harold and I shall fight hand to hand yet, and let the worse man of the two fall. Get thee hence Taillefer, and do thine embassy."

"I will, and methinks there will be small courtesy pass between us." Saying this, Taillefer took his leave and departed, singing,—

"La guerre c'est ma patrie,
Mon harnais ma maison,
Et en toute saison,
Combattre c'est ma vie," &c.

On arriving at the Saxon court he was introduced to the king, who received him in presence of the Saxon thanes. Harold was crowned and seated on the throne, and Taillefer, on reaching the foot of it, made a profound reverence.

"Sire," said the envoy, "I am commanded by my master, William, the king of England, to recall to your recollection certain oaths and promises which you made at Bayeux, to assist our liege lord in putting down all rebellion against him, when the death of his predecessor, King Edward, should give him the crown of England. In the fulfilment of these promises, he calls upon you to deliver the kingdom forthwith into his hands."

Digitized by Google

When Taillefer had delivered this message, Harold calmly turning to the thanes around, thus addressed them.

"Thanes of the Saxons! to whom did Edward bequeath the crown of England?"

"To thee!"

"By whom was this bequest ratified?"

"By the grand council of the kingdom, and by the Saxon people."

"Now Sir Taillefer, tell the duke of Normandy that my oath was a forced oath, and therefore not binding; that his trick of the relics was contemptible, and neither adds to nor detracts from the sacredness of a solemn oath, supposing that such an oath had been binding. But that oath was conditional: I swore fealty to him, if Edward left the crown to him, and that the behest was confirmed by the Saxons. I could only swear faith to a king legally chosen. The gift of the crown did not rest with me. The right of Duke William could only exist under certain conditions; and as neither King Edward nor the Saxons chose to fulfil the wishes of the Norman, his claims fall to the ground. If the Saxons choose to elect him, and that any testament of the dead king can be produced, then is William of Normandy king of England; but no such authority exists, and you have heard what the magnates of this realm say. Bear back then, this answer to your master: that Harold is king of England, by the will of God, the will of Edward, and the will of the Saxons; that his reign and his life must end together. Tell Duke William also, that I desire to live in peace and close alliance with him; but that if he invades England, he shall be met by a warrior king at the head of a warlike people, and then Odin must decide."

"I am also ordered, most noble Harold, to demand the fulfilment of your promise to give your sister in marriage to the count of Mortain."

"That promise will I fulfil, Sir Taillefer, if so it please the Norman duke and his relative; but as my good sister has departed this life some six months gone past, methinks she had better rest where she now lies."

The ambassador bowed, to express his acquiescence in the opinion of the king.

Digitized by Google

"There is still one point on which I crave Earl Harold's answer," said Taillefer, pertinaciously refusing to address him by the title of king. "King William holds Earl Harold to his promise of marrying with the Princess Adèle of England."

"When the Princess Adèle, whom God prosper through the measles and other infantine maladies, arrives at years of discretion, I will consult my wife, Queen Editha, upon that promise of marriage. But friend Taillefer, ere the young damsel arrives at that age I may not be more fit for marriage than my good sister is now."

"God's will be done sire," answered Taillefer; "for my part, I grieve for the death of no man, so he be fairly slain, and duly shrived, if time permits and a shaveling be at hand."

"Fare thee well, ambassador of Duke William! but as the old companion of Harold, I crave thy company Sir Taillefer at our repast. Canst drink our Saxon beer?"

"Ay sire! I always drink the best I can get, and I never find it bad, whatever it may be, when there is plenty. But, by the mass! your monks give good wine and good beer."

"Our beer is strong," observed Harold.

"Ay, and so is my head; it can bear hard knocks and good drink with any Saxon of your nation, and methinks I would fain try both; but the last first, in the mind I am now in."

"I take thy gage Sir Taillefer," interposed Earl Gurth, who stood near his brother, the king; "if Harold will dispense with the laws, let us knock off the knobs on our drinking-horn, and give pledge for pledge till one lies on the rushes, and the other leaps over him without falling."

"Your hand Earl Gurth! and when the English crown is fought for, let you and I try our mettle with the sword."

"So be it Norman! the Saxons never shrink, at board or in battle, from a fair bout with a stranger."

Harold arose from his throne, and mounting his horse, proceeded to visit the strong fortifications he was engaged in erecting round the city. The feast soon followed, where, in the Saxon style, a profusion of food and drink was served to the guests, while minstrels and menials of all kinds filled the hall of the king.

Digitized by Google

"Fill full the bowl for Sir Taillefer," cried Gurth to a serf who was helping him, "and let the king be judge."

"Let the whole company be judge," answered Taillefer; "my master is not here," thus adroitly evading Harold's title.

"'Tis well for him, or I'd make him as drunk as that old harper," said Gurth.

"Nay, nay, not so, by my troth!" replied Taillefer; "I never saw the man that could throw him off his legs by liquor or by blows."

"I will not that ye talk thus of absent men," cried the king; "come Gurth, pledge thy friend, or own that thou fearest him."

"By the skulls of my forefathers! I fear no man. So here goes Taillefer! Health and fair play!"

At one draught he emptied a great horn, and turned it on the palm of his hand.

"Is that fair and clear?"

"Yea, fair as day," answered Taillefer; "now give the horn to me, serf, and fill it to the brim. There! gently, man! don't spill the liquor, for 'tis better for me than for the rushes! there—so—there! Health noble Gurth!" and drinking off the potation he turned up the vessel: not a drop remained.

"Is that fair Gurth?"

"By the gods of Asgaard yes! You may walk through the ordeal by fire, as far as drink goes, for your conscience is as clear as your bowl is empty."

"Or by water either," said a Saxon chief.

"No, by my troth! I never touch water with a good will and a clear conscience, except I am caught in a shower of rain, and then I close my visor and make faces."

"More drink for the rivals!" cried the king; for though Harold's refined nature rejected such brutal orgies, custom was too strong for him.

"We pledge ye thanes!" continued Harold. "Serve around men; let us not parch while these two run over."

Again and again the bowls went round.

"I can dance a war-dance after ten good bouts," cried Gurth, as he leaped on the table with a full bowl in one

Digitized by Google

hand and his sword in the other. "I spill not a drop sirs! watch me." He performed the feat steadily.

"I know not your dance Gurth; but I will do as much: first drink off your wine-cup, and then fill me another."

Taillefer then jumped upon the table, and holding his sword by the point and by the hilt, leaped through it, backwards and forwards, half a dozen times without stopping.

"Bravely done sirs!" said the king. "By the gods, ye will drink the cellars of the Valhalla dry, and no man's skull will be large enough to give you a good draught. What ho, there, cupbearers! ply them with double bowls, or we shall be all too drunk to decide the wager."

The serfs did as they were commanded, but 'twas long ere the heads of the champions showed signs of weakness, and many a strong Saxon chief lay sprawling under the table, while brawls could hardly be kept down by the king's presence.

"Another dance!" cried Harold: "one more proof of sobriety sirs. I shall think my ceorls have mixed water with your wine."

"No by the gods of Egypt!" said Taillefer: "had they done that, I should have been sick long ago. The wine is good!"

Gurth rose to mount a second time on the board, but found his head reel. He stood a moment doubtful of his powers, and Taillefer observing this made a desperate exertion to rise. "I will get on the table, by the rood!" quoth he, "but Gurth cannot."

Solemnly, and with a vacant eye, and a slow difficult enunciation Gurth declared that he could. The Norman, in the same drunken tone denied, and made an effort to mount the table, but fell sprawling on the floor.

"You—lie—you lie on—the—ground—and—I will jump—over thee—and—win the gage," stammered Gurth. Saying this, he attempted to leap, but only rolled over the prostrate giant.

The scene of drunkenness then became general, and Harold, having ordered his attendants to carry Taillefer to his bed, lest any insult should be offered, withdrew from the scene of debauchery to talk with Editha of those great plans which

Digitized by Google

he had formed for the aggrandizement and happiness of the Saxons, as well as for the defence of his dominions; for well and justly did he judge the characters of Duke William and Earl Tostig, now closely united against him by the ties of marriage, of hatred, and of ambition.

Thus occupied, the narrative leaves Harold to return with Taillefer the next day to Normandy, where it resumes the account of the proceedings.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

William assembles his barons bold,
And finds them ready to fight as of old.
They shout and promise; he asks them to pay
But to that they answer, "Nay, duke, nay!"
William however is cunning and fierce,
And their money-bags knows how to pierce.

When William had despatched Taillefer, the gay and gallant, on his embassy—— Softly good knight, your tale is at fault; not Taillefer, but Roger de Beaumont and Count Gilbert were the duke's ambassadors. We must suppose however, that Taillefer went with them, and being so famous, old Mallet remembered him best: let him tell his story as he likes.

When Duke William had despatched Taillefer, he assembled the great Norman chiefs in council. Amongst them were Odo, bishop of Bayeux, and Robert, count of Mortain, his uterine brothers; the Count d'Eu, Roger Montgomery, William Fitzosborne, count of Breteuil, and many others.

"Sirs," said the duke, "the perjury of Harold is known to you, because ye were all present when he swore. He now offers to secure peace between England and Normandy, and defies alike God and the States. Now sirs! ye who know our Norman power and grandeur are best judges of this insult."

"Yea verily! and we will resent it," cried the nobles assembled.

Digitized by Google

"But sirs, let us calculate our means!"

"By arms!" said the chiefs.

"By arms," repeated William: "as brave warriors we cannot say otherwise; yet let us look at the prospect thus opened. We must instantly assemble our notables to find what help they can bestow in money. You, sirs, must also contribute; and for what? for mere vengeance against Harold? No! for honour, for vengeance, for glorious deeds of arms, no doubt; but what will be the guerdon of victory? why. rich and gorgeous England!—the broad lands of the Saxons, teeming with produce, rich townships, numberless slaves, the most beautiful women in the world! all—ay! all will be the reward of conquest! Look, lords, at what the Normans have gained in Italy, though pressed on all sides by the jealous potentates of surrounding kingdoms. What riches and power await upon courage when men are resolved to win! England is a conquest which may be made with greater ease than Apulia, and Sicily, and Greece; no friendly sovereign can assist her; shut up within her own seas she must defend herself singly against the Normans. We have only to meet the enemy in front, for none can come behind us, none distract our attention from the conquest; and instead of the civilized warriors of Germany, Sicily, Apulia, and the fierce Saracens, we have only to encounter the half-barbarous Saxons. Our task is therefore easy when compared with that of the warriors who are in Italy; and we shall have our conquest wholly to ourselves—a rich reward for all our risks. The brave Tostig, brother to the perjured Harold, is ready to invade the north, and so distract the Saxon army by a civil war in Northumberland, while we attack him in the south. Vengeance and the rule of the wild northern savages is all the recompense that Tostig wants, and the rich south remains to us; but the north will not be wholly his; the Normans must be provided for, even in the farthest regions. No place shall be safe from the reward due to our lances. Now sirs, what advise ye?"

The assembly arose simultaneously, and cried aloud—"Glory! England!"

"Be your bidding done," said the duke, and well pleased he dismissed the assembly.

Digitized by Google

Next day he summoned the States General of Normandy to meet him at Lillebonne.

"Why not assemble the Estates at Rouen sire?" demanded Fitzosborne. "The meeting will have more *blazon*, and add to the enthusiasm of the general feeling in favour of your enterprise."

"Good Count Fitzosborne," said the duke, putting on one of his sharp yet good-humoured looks, "you and I are old and true friends, and I can tell to thee what must not be told to all. I am not satisfied that there is any enthusiasm for this expedition, in the first place; and in the second, enthusiasm never stands a moment under the payment of taxes. The first thing all people think of is how they can avoid paying taxes, because taxes are poison to public and private property. An overtaxed nation is insulted from without, and miserable within; the infliction of taxes is the only part of politics which all men understand, and against which all men sooner or later unite, except those who draw profit from the taxes. Let despotism take any form but that, and it is safe: leave the fruits of men's industry in their pockets, and you may do what you like with their liberty in all other ways. I once found it necessary to put an innocent man on the rack under false accusations: all his enemies were delighted; a few of his friends thought I had been misled by his foes, the public generally thought the execution was ingenious and politic as well as a pleasant diversion for the people, and that such sights kept them out of mischief: in short, the general result was a full approbation and admiration of my vigorous government. I afterwards put a scoundrel upon the rack who had been fairly tried and condemned for murder. To try the experiment, I made the citizens pay a tax to defray the charges attending a long prosecution and the price of the rack; the amount was scarcely a sous per man, and the whole town rung with exclamations against my injustice and cruelty."

"The experiment was curious," said Fitzosborne, "but hard upon the innocent man."

"Yes" said the duke, "it was so; but my policy demanded it, and the result was generally favourable to the country:

Digitized by Google

I made it up to him afterwards. But you see, Fitzosborne, that if you tax men, they resist and become your foes: now the *canaille* of the States General will not see the glory or the importance, or anything but the certainty of the *cost* and the uncertainty of the *success*. There will be no enthusiasm—there will be nothing but opposition, and the more *blazon* the assembly has, the more will its opposition to me be noised, and consequently have greater force. No, my good Fitzosborne, we will assemble the knaves at Lillebonne, where I have them closer to my den and farther from their own, and there I can perhaps bully them into sense: if not, my failure will be less public than here, and mind you tell some babbling acquaintance of yours—for instance, that meddling, curious, intriguing monk Girard—tell him, as a secret, that I have vowed vengeance against the first who refuses me a loan: they all know I can bite hard when I dislike a man, and this will alarm them. Let all the gendarmes and archers that can be spared from hence march to Lillebonne to-night, and let the executioner go with them. Tell Girard this also, but as a secret; for unless he hears secrets, he forgets to tell his neighbours—news has otherwise no interest for him."

The next day the court and States General were assembled at Lillebonne: they met in the great hall of the palace, and William from his throne informed them of what they all knew before. He then entered at length into the advantages which would accrue from the invasion of England; not only to Normandy generally, but to each individual in particular.

When he had done speaking, Fitzosborne arose and offered from his own fortune to build, man, and arm, forty vessels of war for the expedition; some other lords offered their assistance also, but the proposal was received in silence by the rest of the assembly.

"What say ye sirs?" and William's fierce voice of displeasure and lowering look no man in that room liked to face. Some few were inclined to give a little assistance, others strongly opposed this; they got together in groups, and then, less awed by the direct questions and threatening aspect of their lord, became loud and violent.

Digitized by Google

"They were not bound as vassals to cross the seas; it was not a national quarrel, they had no interest in it; the duke's right to the English crown was not clear to them; they were already crushed by the heavy taxes occasioned by the last war with the count of Anjou and the king of France: they neither would nor could pay any more."

In short the assembly grew so vociferous and turbulent, that the duke thought it best to dismiss the company.

"Sirs," cried he aloud, but with great kindness of manner, "I see in all you say great good sense and matter for much discussion; but you must talk it over in private, we are too numerous for hot debate: I therefore dismiss ye for the nonce. In a few days we will meet again; bide ye then for a while in Lillebonne, where we can discuss this affair more tranquilly than in the great city of Rouen. Seigneurs, for the moment let us separate, and God be with you!"

He then rose from his throne, and with great affability bowed to the assembly, which separated.

As the crowd left the hall, the duke beckoned an archer to him and whispered a few words. The armed man, on leaving his chief, called aloud to a member of the assembly who had made himself conspicuous in finding arguments against the invasion: instantly all eyes were fixed upon the caller and the called; the latter obeyed, for that archer was well known, his call was seldom pleasant. When the citizen joined the armed man, the latter whispered a few words in his ear; he turned pale, and the familiar, even affectionate way, in which the soldier passed his arm under that of his captive seemed to be anything but consolatory to the latter, or any of those who observed what passed. A whisper ran from each man to his neighbour, and that effervescence of rational views of peace and economy which was up to this moment of increasing intensity, so as almost to amount to being obstreperous, gradually died away, as the loud thunder, after a crash, rolls into the distant welkin.

"Fitzosborne! did I not tell you the knaves would resist us?"

"Curses light upon them!" said Odo, bishop of Bayeux, who had undertaken to fit out and arm one hundred ships of war at his own charges.

Digitized by Google

"Nay, nay, good brother, curse them not till we have done with them; then ban them an ye will!" said the duke laughing. "Now we must take a safer course. Fitz-osborne, send them one by one to me in my private cabinet; and it would be well were you, my good and ghostly brother Odo, and all my friends, laymen and clergy, to talk separately with those ye are each best acquainted with, and point out to them the plunder of England, and that no moneyed speculation is so good. Ourselves will labour the gold-mines with our swords for glory; they will get the ore. Away! lose no time. The arrest of that talking rascal, whose visage shall not be seen again till he pays gold to get on the sunny side of a dungeon will work; he loves liberty, and by the mass I will make it dearer than ever to him: his arrest, I say, will soften their hearts and open their minds to the validity of my arguments."

"Bravo!" cried the bishop; "such knaves would ruin all our plans."

"I will turn him to account," said William, "his money will assist our purse, and the fright his arrest has produced will make his fellows all as tender as young turkeys. In less than an hour my oratory will make more impression on them."

After this, William had a private conference with every rich burgher in his dukedom; he persuaded each of the advantage which the conquest of England would be to his private interest, as well as to the general prosperity of the duchy; and of each man he borrowed ten times the sum of money he could have laid on him in taxes. The funds he thus raised were enormous, and each rich citizen who lent him money strained all his influence to persuade others to embark in an enterprise, the success of which would be forwarded by increasing the number of contributors.

Thus the duke soon satisfied the public of his talents, and of the just views he had taken. The general enthusiasm for the expedition rose to a high pitch, and spread not only through Normandy, but through France, Spain, Germany, and Belgium: everywhere those who loved deeds of arms, and those who loved money, flocked to the standard of the duke of Normandy.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Frosty weather, clear and bright,
Harold a fine love-letter doth write,
A raven gives an ugly croak,
Sounding very unlike a joke.
Tostig hits a very hard blow,
And Editha a voyage must go.

HAROLD ascended the throne without opposition; he possessed the love and confidence of the Saxon people; and favourable as the times were for discontented chiefs to resist, no attempt was made to resist his authority—a convincing proof that his assumption of the sceptre was agreeable to his subjects of all ranks. A great man he was, and though he had every difficulty to contend with that could assail a monarch, save that of discontent amongst his people, their affection enabled him to cope with all foes except fate—death put an end to his power, and destroyed the Saxons' rights for eight hundred years. The Norman still rules, and badly; but the Saxon spirit lives, is rising, and will finally conquer. This say I, the translator—Sir W. Mallet's tale runs thus:—

Harold's first measure was to equip his fleet and army, that he might repel invasion. The Childe of Sussex had charge of the seacoast under his command in the south; Edwin and Morcar had the same in the north, where Harold expected the first storm to burst. Judging justly that the active Tostig, who had not, like the duke of Normandy, the affairs of a country to settle, and surrounding nations to propitiate, but roved like a pirate, would be the first to land.

The frost was severe at Bodiam Castle; glittering icicles and deep snow, and the cold black course of the Rother, pushing its bubbling way darkling through the whole surface, presented a dreary prospect; yet the sun shone clear, and

Digitized by Google

Alfnoth, the Childe, was riding abroad with his beautiful daughter; the rich carnation of her complexion heightened by the keen air. Her snowy neck, concealed with dark furs, was in strong contrast to her fair skin, and to the thick braids of golden hair which lay gracefully upon her shoulders.

The Childe was engaged in deep conversation with a number of the neighbouring thanes, who rode by his side in armour, while around Editha, their expected queen, flocked many of the high dames and maidens who accompanied their husbands and fathers to partake of the Saxon hospitality, now more than ever exercised at Bodiam Castle. Along the banks of the river were seen fishing parties, while through the woods ranged bowmen, led by Elstan, in pursuit of birds and wolves: in the lawns near the castle, a large company were engaged in trials of strength and agility, especially that of casting the battle-axe at a butt, or block of wood, and splitting timber by heavy blows with the two-handed battle-axe.

The party on horseback had not proceeded far, when an armed courier from the king was seen approaching; his dress made him known, and the heart of Editha beat high: on reaching Alfnoth, he presented him with a letter, and then gave another to Editha.

The despatch for Alfnoth was to say, that Harold knew the Isle of Wight was in danger of a descent from Tostig's roving squadron, then ready to sail from Ostend. To Editha the letter ran thus:—

"What is the crown to Harold unless shared with her whose love has been his hope, his strength, his existence for years? Fate, my beloved, has long enough divided us; we have gone through hard trials; the present hour is our own; let us not delay to profit by it, for great events are gathering like winter storms. I stand like a tall oak, a mark on which the tempest will pour forth its wrath. I fear it not; I dare and defy it, and will give shelter to my people, till the hurricane spends its fury; but I pine for thy company. Come then, most dear, most beautiful, most beloved of the Saxon race! come and take shelter under the protection of your lover and your king. The

Digitized by Google

royal mandate has always been obeyed by Alfnoth, let him with faith and truth still obey; long has it divided us, now let it join us! let our nuptials take place at Winchester next week, I have directed preparations to be made for that purpose; sooner I cannot leave London, being engaged, with Morcar and Edwin, providing for the northern armies. When you are queen, I shall leave you to direct the council in London while I go to York for a few days. I shall return and bide fate in the capital, ready there to meet William and Tostig together, or singly, as they please to act. With God's blessing and your prayers, our beloved Saxons shall never know invading masters. Let the great Alfred be my model; let me finish his work; making such an example of the first that set their unhallowed feet on English ground as shall scare all Europe from again attempting that deed of danger. If I fail, 'twere well Editha that we should die, for Saxon hearts like yours and mine, could not look upon the scenes to which the people would be doomed by my defeat. We saw how the count of Anjou ravaged Normandy; yet the people had strong towns, and towers, and castles, to which they could fly; compared to the fortifications of the Normans ours are nothing—our country would be destroyed. The passage of the Angevin army was a mere transit; the Norman, if victorious, would be upon us for ever! But they shall not; our people are brave and faithful. By Odin! they shall bite the dust under the blows of our strong battle-axes. Adieu for a few days; and then—then Editha, we shall be united for ever!"

Editha read this letter with feelings of gratified love, ambition, and confidence. She gloried in the exaltation of her lover, and in the nobleness of his character. She felt confidence in the greatness of his abilities and his courage: in short, she felt for him all that a woman in love feels for the object of her affection. But there was a still higher gratification, one that gives a zest to woman's love, and which Editha had a mind capable of appreciating. Harold was a sovereign, raised by the voice of the people to that high dignity; a whole nation had chosen him as the man to whom its destinies could safely be confided in the hour of danger: a nation had therefore confirmed her

Digitized by Google

judgment! The just vanity, the just ambition of the female heart, was thus gratified to its utmost extent. Inspired by these glorious feelings, she felt able to bear his death if his fall were doomed: his glory was her first object; she could die for his fame—she could see him die in defending the Saxon crown; but she could not bear his defeat. His death, her death, were things that must happen in the course of nature; they were certain events which she had accustomed herself to contemplate and to prepare for, in the full hope and confidence of a future state. But the defeat of the Saxon monarch in battle was the death of the Saxons as a nation; and to her fervid mind all other misfortunes sunk into nothing when compared to this overwhelming calamity. Thus elated in spirits herself, she excited the same feelings in all around her and the party turned towards the castle.

As they passed a withered witch elm, a raven sat upon its bough; Editha saw it not, heeded it not, but the vassals beheld the bird, and all who saw it trembled in silence lest it should proclaim its sad forebodings! Its hoarse voice was not heard till the palfrey of the maiden reached the tree, but as she passed under the scathed and shrivelled branches, the bird sent forth three horrid croaks, and flew away! Editha started, and a stifled groan was heard among the company; and then the screeches of an old owl, seated in a hollow oak hard by, answered the appeal of the raven, and threw the greatest part of the cavalcade into a state of terror.

The Saxons, Sir William told me, says Robert Wace, are deeply read in those signs, and tokens of approaching evil, which it is impious to disregard. Editha was for a moment startled at these awful signs but soon recovered her presence of mind.

"Fear not dear friends!" said she, "I hail this as a happy omen for the Saxons. The horrid raven's croak was a challenge, made by our enemy the enchanted *Reafen* of the North, our ancient foe, routed by Alfred the Great. So shall the modern Reafen be by Harold; and in token of this, hearken to the bird of wisdom seated in the heart of the English oak, at whose screech the black foreboding bird

Digitized by Google

flies! Had the raven remained on her withered witch elm, and the wise owl being scared away, then, indeed, should we have had cause for wailing and for tears. Be joyful my friends! we have seen a good omen for the Saxons." As she said this, she tried to rouse the over-shadowed spirit of the company, and the party reached the castle.

"Father, when will you proceed to the Isle of Wight? Methinks there is no time to lose, for Tostig is on the alert."

"I shall go there to-morrow, for your observation is just."

"Let me accompany you dear father; a queen's exhortations will rouse a nation to war more than even the words of a hero." Editha blushed deeply as she called herself a queen, for the first time, though only to her father were the words addressed.

"Be it so Editha!"

The next day they departed with a vast retinue.

On arriving at Carisbrooke castle, the Childe assembled the chief men of the island, and ordered them to take such measures for their defence as the occasion required. Editha, at a great meeting of the women, explained the danger and misery which awaited them if the Normans were to gain the victory; thus she inspired the whole population with a determined spirit of ressistance, which was soon to be put to the proof.

The day following, Alfnoth, accompanied by Editha and all the chief people of the place, made a tour of the island. They had not long proceeded when a dense fog obscured the atmosphere; their party thus became somewhat divided, late in the evening and as they passed a wood which concealed the head of a deep chasm in the high ground above the beach, some strange men appeared. They had mounted from the sea by this defile or chasm. An alarm was quickly spread, but ere the followers of the Childe could get together, loud cries and shouts were heard through the fog, and an advancing foe was perceived in the mist; their armour flickered in the haze, and blows and screams followed. "By Odin! the rovers are upon us," cried the Childe, as he rallied those around him, and fought desperately.

Digitized by Google

"Now Saxons!" cried Editha, who was close by her father, "now Saxons, now—be worthy of your name, and of Harold your king!"

The brave Saxon yeomen crowded round her, fighting with desperate courage; but the foe was too numerous, and could not long be withstood. Editha saw her father fall; his head was riven, helm and skull, by an axe; 'twas the execrable Tostig gave the blow, and in an instant after he seized her! Four Norsemen bore her senseless down the cliffs.

When Editha saw Alfnoth struck down she lost all fear of danger, and leaped from her palfrey to assist him; being seized, she struggled for an instant, and then fell upon the body. The brave Elstan killed three of the assailants before they could capture his beloved lady, but overpowered by numbers was forced back, and the invaders were masters of the ground. Tostig having reached the island under cover of the fog, had mounted up to the higher land by the large chasm, when, having discovered the approach of Alfnoth's party, he attacked it.

The Norsemen lost no time in following up their blows, spreading their bands they ravaged the island, levying heavy contributions, and collecting pillage in order to sail for the north.

When Editha recovered her senses, she found herself prisoner on board Tostig's ship. Her first thought was to cast herself into the sea, for her mind was stunned; she had been suddenly hurled, as it were, from the pinnacle of happiness down to the lowest abyss of human misery; a kingly lover lost, a diadem struck from her brow, freedom gone! Bereaved of her father, and cast into the power of a wild, banished, and vindictive rover, the brother of her affianced husband, but sworn to bitter hate against him, and against all of her family. Her beauty tempting lawless unscrupulous men; the opportunity inviting insult! Oh! if terrestrial sufferings are an excuse for desperation and despair, that excuse was Editha's; for misfortunes were heaped upon her with a maddening rapidity of accumulation.

For a moment she had no thought but that of self-destruction. Drenched with her father's blood, she was thrown

Digitized by Google

upon the deck roughly; his mortal wound gaped before her, and his gore, staining her dress, riveted her look, vacant and insane was that look, and the darkness of night closed upon her in this stupified state. The wind had arisen as the shades of night fell, the vessel rolled to and fro with a fearful motion, the cold wind whistled through the rigging, the storm raged and the forked lightning flashed fearfully to those who cared for life, but Editha wished for death: the thunder crashed close and loud, the ship's crew trembled, Editha hoped for destruction. The dread bolts of heaven had no terror for her; she moved not, she sat statue-like, the despair of her heart made the raging elements seem tranquillity itself, compared to the frightful storm of her soul! There was such a wandering, dreary, feverish confusion in her brain, that she sought in vain to answer the questions which arose:—

"Is this real? is it true? am I alive? am I Editha? Has my father been killed before my eyes? Was I riding at his side a few minutes gone? Were we well and happy, and conversing of my marriage with Harold? Is he now dead? am I alive—a prisoner on board Tostig's ship? What is it all? great God, what is it? Merciful Father spare me! Yes! yes! it is all true—it is all real! Oh God, what shall I do? I cannot, cannot bear it! Death, madness, anything, to save my brain from this dreadful feeling! Death! —is it not in my power? Shall I not destroy myself and end this agony at once—shall I not sleep?" "But," said a still small voice within, floating gently amidst all the wild confusion which grief had created, "but Editha, whom servest thou on earth? whom servest thou in heaven? Who giveth? who taketh away? Thou hast a king on earth for whom thou shouldst live, for he loves thee better than he loves his life. Thou hast a King in heaven whose handmaid thou art, and who tells thee to put thy trust in His power. The evil spirit has laid his accursed hands on thy body; he has given thee into captivity; he has slain thy father; he has cast thee down from the pinnacle of joy into the depths of misery, but he has not yet made the last great conquest over thee, the conquest of the mind; he has thy body, he has not got thy soul! Wilt thou abandon thy post in the

Digitized by Google

hour of battle? Wilt thou cast off thy allegiance to God and to Harold, and flinging thy poor body into the deep waters of the ocean, cry aloud,—'God of Heaven! I mistrust and forsake thy worship! Spirit of darkness, receive me thy faithful servant—body and soul I am thine for ever!' Editha, wilt thou do this or not?'"

This internal address passed through her perturbed mind like a balm; she felt renovated and nerved to bear all things. "The holy rood," quoth she to herself, "bore more suffering than this ship offers, and I—shall I complain, who am a poor, weak, and erring mortal? Shall I bend to the evil spirit, when the Saviour of the world is my leader in heaven? Shall I bend before man, when the noble Harold is my king and husband on earth? Away with such weakness! Let Editha show herself a Christian and a queen, and trusting to God defy the world and its wickedness."

Collected within herself she sat, patiently abiding her fate, and as the sailors passed by her, one stooped and said in a whisper—

"Trust to Odin—Loke has no power over you now. Alfnoth is in the Valhalla, he rejoices—grieve not."

It was the Vala in disguise. She had cast her spells on hearing that Alfnoth was gone to the Isle of Wight, and finding direful signs of immediate calamity, certain prognostics of an adverse nature, she drew her cabalistical conclusions and followed her friends to caution them that danger was near. She arrived after they had left Carisbrooke, and still pursuing their steps reached them as Alfnoth fell; she saw Editha carried off, and stripping a dead Norseman in the dark, armed herself and joined the party, by which she succeeded in getting on board the same ship with Editha. She had however first exchanged these few words with Elstan.

"Fly! tell Harold what has passed, send off ships to intercept us. A storm approaches, if I can I will cut the cable of the ship that Editha is on board, and they must then put to sea singly. Send Canute to watch us, in case opportunities should offer; let him hide his armed men, and appear as a smuggler. Away! lose no time in fighting, the whole of Harold's army could not now save her here;

Digitized by Google

she is on board ere this. Away man, and may Odin speed you and the Valchyries protect us!"

When Editha heard the well-known voice of the Vala, she felt great comfort to have near her a female so full of resources, and so faithful. It was a consolation she little expected. It seemed as if her prayers were heard; as if some chance of escape would offer, and she prayed in the fulness of her gratitude, that God would forgive the thoughts of self-destruction which her despair had for a moment engendered.

While these thoughts occupied her, the Vala again approached her unobservedly, "Dare you brave the perils of the storm?"

"Yes Vala, I dare brave anything—but what mean you?"

"To cut their cable and let the ship drift with the wind where it lists, trusting to Odin who favours the brave: we may thus escape; we may be better, we can scarcely be worse off. If we are thrown on the Norman coast, Duke William and Matilda would protect thee, for thou art in vile hands here."

"Cut the cable Vala; I fear nothing—God protects the innocent!"

The Vala gradually approached the cable, and in the darkness of the storm severed with her large clasp-knife the labouring cable, jagging it as if worn by the friction. When nearly done, she moved swiftly away, and began to recount strange stories of Norwegian annals to the sailors. Suddenly she cried out as if in terror—

"Comrades we are lost! the friction has cut our cable! I feel the ship drifting!"

Astonished and alarmed, the sailors were at once aware of the accident and the danger. The vessel rolled as if about to upset, lurching dreadfully. The wind blew from the coast, but shoals and rocks were near. The crew were, however, experienced sailors, and in an instant every man was at his post.

When Editha was first put on board another boat had arrived from the shore; she could not perceive who it was, but a man jumped on deck and instantly proceeded to his

Digitized by Google

cabin. He complained that he was weary with the least labour, that his strength was exhausted by ill health, and he wished to God he had remained quiet: he was no longer fit for war.

Editha thought she knew the voice of this foreigner, who spoke the Norman language, and the idea that a Norman was on board gave her some hope, for she feared the wild Scandinavian marauders.

When the confusion took place from the yielding of the cable, this person sallied forth in great terror; again Editha heard his voice, and again her ear avowed a perfect acquaintance with it; but the darkness, the storm, the pouring rain, impeded her sight, while she herself, being under a sort of shed, could not get a distinct view of the stranger. A long-continued flash of lightning just then illumined the air with its transient brilliance, and, shedding its light upon the face of the man, she beheld—Pecquigny! Nature could not bear the sight; her blood froze in her veins, and unable to speak, she uttered a shrill cry and fell senseless on the deck. But in that storm a woman's shriek could scarcely be audible to the sailors; the gale swept it away unheard by them, and the vessel drove before the wind.

It is now time to return to London.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XL.

Harold hearing of Editha's fright,
Rides a horse the live-long night,
Takes to the water full of spleen,
And fights very like a horse marine.

No sooner had Elstan parted from the Vala, than with the speed of a man urged by so much public and private danger, he reached the shore, and leaping on board the lightest vessel of the Childe's flotilla, soon reached the Hampshire coast, and taking horse, rode to London.

The fury and grief of Harold did not paralyze his exertions. In a few minutes he was on the road to the coast, by daybreak he arrived in the Isle of Wight, and in a few moments he sallied forth at the head of the armed inhabitants.

The unusual stir, which Tostig, from the neighbouring hills, observed in the castle and the town, together with the number of vessels that were seen urging their course towards the island from the opposite coast, convinced him that his brother had arrived. Harold had, at Southampton, cast himself into a long narrow boat filled with strong rowers, leaving orders for all the armed men at hand to follow him with expedition. The youth of the neighbourhood, animated by the desire to follow their monarch and win glory under his immediate orders, then seized every vessel that was to be found, and pushed off for the isle of danger.

Tostig ordered his marauding troops to gather towards the bay, where their ships lay at anchor. He had not yet learned that Editha was his prisoner, for though he was aware that she was a woman of high rank by the number of her retinue, he knew not her name; and as his people made no prisoners, but slew all that were taken as fast as they were disarmed, he was ignorant of what had

Digitized by Google

passed in the island. The confusion of the fight had also prevented him from recognizing Alfnoth, and the necessity for using the little time he well knew would be given him to raise contributions and pillage, kept him moving so rapidly about, that he even remained ignorant of his own ship having cut her cable in the storm and gone to sea.

The view of the armed force sallying from the castle walls vigorously enforced the orders of Tostig, and the dispersed parties were seen fast marching towards where their fleet was at anchor.

"By Odin!" cried Harold, "the ruffians will escape; I have but one chance; let every man try to capture Tostig, for they will have sent the queen on board ere now, or have killed her: if we can but seize Tostig they will give Editha in exchange. Follow me, brave Saxons, each man according to his speed, or that of his horse. They shall not embark at their ease while Harold lives!"

Thus exclaiming, he urged on his horse, followed by a handful of brave and well-mounted vassals.

"Make for the boats! make for the boats!" was his cry, for the invaders had most of them reached the beach where their vessels awaited them.

The day was fine, the storm had passed, the atmosphere was serene. Tostig stood in his boat directing the embarkation. Harold arrested his own progress for an instant on the crest of the high ground above the enemy; with a rapid and piercing glance he sought for the form of Editha,—it was not there, but he beheld his brother standing in the stern of a boat near the shore. A small body had not yet embarked; he dashed his courser down the heights, and some thirty men followed him; they reached the beach; Harold rode furiously through the Norsemen, overthrowing them on either side, till he gained the water, and then plunging in, urged his steed towards the boat in which Tostig stood. That bold bad earl shouted in derision:—

"What! Harold the usurper! Has thy brotherly love brought thee here man to give me provisions for the voyage, in return for your salted minions in the barrels? or has thy patriotism stirred thee to sacrifice thy life for thy dear

Digitized by Google

subjects of the Isle of Wight? Come on fool, and I will cool thy hot blood in the sea!"

By this time the dauntless monarch had reached the boat. With one strong sweep of his battle-axe and the power of his horse, he dashed the protruded oars and spears on either side, tumbling the crowded boatmen and soldiers one over the other; for as the boat reeled with their pressure on one side, they could not stand, and many were plunged into the sea.

Harold was close to his brother.

"The queen, ravisher! restore the queen or die!" cried Harold, as his battle-axe, grasped in both hands, gleamed high above the head of Tostig, whose shield presented but little obstacle to the mighty blow.

"The queen is not here, who do you mean?—don't strike! I understand you not," exclaimed Tostig in a breath. "Push into deep water!" added he at the same moment, addressing his sailors.

Harold resolved not to let his foe escape thus, and quick upon his words, down came the ponderous axe, when a sudden roll of the boat carried Tostig's head beyond the blade, which, striking the boat, drove through the planks and opened a wide breach: the water poured in and she began to sink. Harold, holding his axe in his left hand, made a grasp at his brother and seized him by the throat. A mortal struggle ensued, Harold striving to capture Tostig; but the latter was in courage and strength nearly his equal, and other boats crowded around the king, whose followers however also came to his assistance.

Tostig strived mightily yet could not free himself from the iron grasp of Harold, who turned his horse's head to drag the invader to land; but the followers of the duke, seizing him by the body and limbs, endeavoured to pull him on board another large boat which had come to their assistance. The combat raged fiercely, and Harold, finding he could not tear the body of Tostig, now senseless, from the numbers that had got hold of it, suddenly let go, and they all fell back, on which the hero leaped his horse's fore-legs into the boat, and with his battle-axe sunk it as he had done the other—but then his horse fell, and before the king could get disentangled

Digitized by Google

from the plunging animal, the senseless Tostig was thrown into a fresh kele and pushed off.

"Follow me comrades!" shouted Harold, as he freed himself from his horse, and swum after the flying boat: four intrepid Saxons followed him.

"Save me!" cried the king to the men in the boat, as if he were one of their own people; "save me from these devils!"

The boat waited for him, he seized the gunwale, but as he rose above the water they recognized their enemy, and a cry of terror was sent forth; then they struck and pushed till his grasp was loosed, and he was again surrounded by boats and foes. His four brave followers were killed, the struggle became too unequal, the king giving up the combat, allowed them to row away without further molestation, and swum back to the shore, wounded and exhausted.

Before Harold left London, he had given command for his fleets to push out to sea from the various ports, and endeavour to catch the fleet of Tostig; and when the combat in which he had been so desperately engaged was over, he sent Canute to sea also, with orders to follow the Vala's ship. He was convinced she had succeeded in cutting the cable, because the Isle of Wight peasants had, from the hills, counted the vessels of Tostig and brought him word there was one less than had originally made the coast.

Harold judged that his brother would make for the North; hence, wounded as he was, he now rode to Gravesend, and from that port put to sea with his swiftest vessel and a picked crew. Having ordered his men to keep concealed, except a few to work the vessel, he set his sails and struck out into the eastern opening of Dover Straits, in the conviction that Tostig's crews would have orders to make for some northern port, or to Ostend, in case of being separated by unforeseen accidents.

The narrative here leaves King Harold in all the anxiety of a man the greatness of whose private sufferings demanded some portion of his time. The person without whom life had no charm for him was in danger, and unless he could regain her he resolved to choose an able successor in his brother Gurth, and quit a world no longer bearable. But first he

Digitized by Google

would avenge himself upon the destroyer of Editha, for he was scarcely turned from the worship of Odin, and among the Saxons the forgiveness of enemies, as inculcated by the pure Christian doctrine, was not practised.

Alas! said Sir William, we cannot ourselves boast much; and in truth Harold was more generous and forgiving than the Conqueror, who pardoned no man that offended him: to die without torture was the utmost mercy that the enemy of Duke William could expect. But his enemies generally were in the wrong; he did not often take offence without just cause. Harold was a generous and noble character.

The narrative now returns to the adventures of Editha on board Tostig's ship, which was called the *Avenger*.

CHAPTER XLI.

Pecquigny plies his brutal wit,
Throwing the maiden into a fit,
But lo! the Vala cuts her jokes,
And Valchyries are funny folks;
Other dangers then are braved,
But finally Editha fair is saved.
Harold flies, Pecquigny dies,
Tostig mouths, a blustering railer,
Harold proves the better sailor.

ALTHOUGH Editha's exclamation, as she sunk senseless, was unheard in the storm by the preoccupied mariners, it was not unheard or unheeded by the dastardly wretch Pecquigny, whose fears always made him alert, and the least thing was observed by his quick eye and nice ear. Turning to the place whence the cries proceeded, he perceived a female; the exclamation was from her then—a prisoner and a female in his power roused all his vile feelings. But there was then too much danger to give himself any immediate trouble beyond asking a sailor some questions.

"What woman," said he to the steersman, "have ye here?"

Digitized by Google

"I don't know, she was taken in the fight on shore."

"Some peasant I suppose?"

"No, she is a woman of rank by her dress."

"Is she young?"

"Yes, young enough, and very handsome, as far as I saw; but the girl seemed half dead, she was bloody and did not know what passed. The sailors say, that if she be not a very high person they will treat her rudely to-morrow; they don't rightly know yet whether any one has charge of her, and if not, they will consider her as fair booty. However, the ship's master and yourself best know what is to be done I suppose."

Pecquigny's curiosity was raised by this description of the prisoner's beauty; but he was then too much alarmed to enter farther upon the subject.

"Has the earl sent any orders about her?"

"I don't know, I believe not. She was taken in the fight, and when brought on board was almost dead: they threw her upon some sails under the poop, and there she has remained ever since."

"By the mass!" thought Sir Pecquigny, "I shall have some diversion with this girl if we get through this storm. Well, good night comrade," and he retired to his berth. When day broke the storm had passed away, and though the wind continued to blow with great strength the morning was bright. The master resolved to make for the port of Jomsborg, where his chief could readily sell his booty to the piratical inhabitants of that famous city. Such had been the orders of Tostig in case a storm should disperse his fleet. With this view, and anxiously sweeping the horizon with his eye, lest some of Harold's fleet should appear, the pilot directed the course of the solitary bark towards the north; for as the wind had veered round to the south-west and the frost had disappeared, he expected a more quiet passage in that direction than in any other: he feared also to approach too near the English coast, well knowing that Harold's ships would push along shore towards the Isle of Wight the moment they heard of the invasion. When day was somewhat advanced Pecquigny arose from his hammock and proceeded to the miserable hole into which Editha had

Digitized by Google

been cast. Exhausted by the dreadful events she had sunk into a disturbed sleep just before daybreak. In such great trials, to which human beings are at times exposed for inscrutable purposes, nature often destroys the mind by madness, or the body by death; if not, she sends some relief, some strong support which enables the sufferer to encounter all misfortunes: a strength wonderful and incomprehensible, as all things are that surround and affect us.

When she first came to her senses her mind was chaotic, that she was alive was all that she could comprehend in the terrible moment: shortly the mists cleared away, and her misfortunes, in all their awful details, poured upon her agonized crazed brain. Alfnoth killed! Harold! her happiness! her misery! the throne—captivity! All these night horrors assumed shape and form with soul-harrowing minuteness; and as they unfolded their dread realities to her sinking heart, they seemed too much for poor human frailty to bear. The withering picture now stood displayed before her in all its dreariment, and despair left but the idea of death! But would Death come? did she feel him creeping upon her? showed he signs of approach? No! Then what remained—to seek him? to plunge into the sea while she had power to destroy life? In a little while she might find herself manacled, or worse inflictions heaped upon her.

This was the second chapter of the awful volume of human misery which she had on that day opened: the first seemed too awful to reperuse, the second offered suicide as a quick and blessed antidote; a single step and the ocean would engulf herself and all her miseries, the peace of death would cast its mysterious shade upon her and upon her sufferings: a few minutes and her cold, insensible corpse would float upon the waste of waters. On this tempting page she dwelt as one fascinated, yet doubtful.

"No more—I shall be no more! Oh, those words of peace—no more! signifying happy sleep, defiance to man and all his cruelties, all his injustice! But Harold, the object of my adoration—he lives! My life is all to him; and now, in the midst of the terrible sufferings that my danger will cause to him, shall I take away all he has to hope for? But

Digitized by Google

Harold can die; and if I live, will these monsters leave me fit to be Harold's wife—or fit to live? Oh no! better to die pure and worthy of Harold than live unworthy of the foremost, noblest Saxon! If my loss is too much to bear, let him too die, and peace will be upon us both! Oh merciful God assist me!" As she uttered this exclamation the voice of conscience and of religion suddenly arose, and formed the third chapter of that sad volume: in it she was told to put on the armour of God, and to bear the brunt of the battle. At once she felt returning strength; her mind gradually calmed; the presence of the friendly Vala gave her fresh confidence, it seemed as a sign from heaven to chide her doubting spirit. Sleep came with all its refreshing powers, and gave that vigour to her strong, though sylph-like form, which religion had infused into her firm and unflinching mind: she slept sound, though her bed was but a piece of canvas, her clothes wet with rain, the air cold, and the ship tossed by the troubled ocean.

In this repose the fiendish Pecquigny found her; his hateful and unexpected appearance had, perhaps, longer delayed her sleep than any other of her misfortunes. She had no belief in spirits, yet Pecquigny she thought was among the dead. Was it he? could it be the same?—he might have a twin brother who resembled him. She knew not, and lost in idle conjecture sleep had fallen upon her gentle spirit. Pecquigny now removed the sail which she had drawn over her face to preserve herself from the cold; at once he recognized those lovely features, and stared with inconceivable joy.

"What!" cried the drazel, "Editha, the betrothed queen of England, and the object of my passion! Oh lucky Pecquigny! blessed be the tail of the devil! for he never abandons Pecquigny, his faithful servant. Now fate to thy work: I have Editha in my power, and Harold shall not have her till the more happy Pecquigny, the satiated Pecquigny, be tired of his victim!"

Saying this he fixed his eyes gloatingly on the face of Editha: it was pale, but composed, the roses had fled, the lilies were triumphant. Her long dark eyelashes reposed upon her pallid cheek, she seemed like breathing marble,

Digitized by Google

and her dishevelled golden hair, free from its boasted braids, was scattered in profusion over her heaving bosom. The magnificence of her apparel added to the greatness of her beauty, both in strong contrast with the rude shed which covered her, and the coarse canvas on which that graceful form was stretched. The dirt and disorder of the vessel after the storm, the rude figure of the steersman, the Satan-like visage of Pecquigny, the sleeping victim, formed a picture of misfortune as revolting as it was real. It might be thought that vice itself would have softened into feelings of pity towards an object so suffering, so innocent, and so lovely.

Not so with Pecquigny. Lust and vengeance lighted up and twinkled in those small squinting eyes, as they leered upon the intended victim of his baseness.

The sailors, exhausted with the exertions of the past night, had all gone below, except the helmsman and one or two who were forward. Pecquigny longed to enjoy the despair of Editha, and with a gentle shake broke her slumber.

"Editha! Editha! my love, awake to your own Pecquigny!"

The large blue eyes of the Saxon maiden opened wide: she seemed bewildered. "What! who calls? who are you? O God!" her heart sunk as the truth flashed upon her coming senses, and cast them back upon realities. She groaned in agony, and covered her face with her hands.

"Do not fear, dearest maiden," said Pecquigny with a hellish grin; "it is I, who once wooed you in vain when the handsome Sir Auvrai was near; but now, my charmer, Sir Auvrai is where he would have sent Pecquigny the despised; and Pecquigny the happy has his dear Editha all to himself! no more the suing, entreating Pecquigny, but the irresistible Pecquigny, who cares for neither God nor man, though very much for his friend the devil, who has placed you in his power. Come, my sweet paramour, for such you shall be to the faithful Pecquigny; come, show thy lovely face and smile upon him who will be thy lord and master, from this hour, till age spoils thy peerless beauty, and proclaims thee only fit for menial drudgery: even then thy true

Digitized by Google

Pecquigny will not cast thee out; he will keep thee among his menials and look upon thy worn-out frame, and wrinkled face furrowed by care. He will then think how he ravished thee from Auvrai and Harold of England, and that thou gavest them all up for thine own dear Pecquigny, and in the fulness of his gratitude he will forbid his grooms to beat and maltreat thee."

Thus jeering, he pulled her hands from her face; but her eyes were shut, she could not endure his looks, his eyeballs seemed in her imagination again to strain out as she had last seen them.

"Well, be obstinate as thou wilt now, lovely maiden: your wilfulness shall be short. I will be master, believe me, ere twelve hours pass over thy foolish head. Listen to Pecquigny; for, as I before told you, he acts by reason not heedless passion: he likes to show silly damsels what prudence and sound sense advise. Now maiden, hearken unto me. You are on board a ship and there are no regular commanders; our cable broke, we pushed to sea perforce. I am the chief person here and I will claim you for Earl Tostig; I will order them, as if by his directions, to run into Ostend, and there you shall be mine, safe and happy. If you resist, I will give you up to the sailors, who may have their will. Speak! will you be mine, or be given up to infamy?"

"Wretch!" exclaimed Editha, starting up in desperation, "I will be neither thine nor theirs: O God! I am thine, wholly thine. Merciful Virgin, protect me in this dread hour! Saviour of the world assist me."

While uttering these exclamations she threw herself on her knees, raising her hands and eyes to heaven in an agony of prayer.

Pecquigny approached to take her by force to his own berth, when a sailor ahead cried aloud: "A vessel in sight!"

The idea of danger never failed to attract the attention of Pecquigny.

"What is she?" cried the steersman.

"I cannot make her out," replied the man ahead.

"Go aloft then and look out."

While the sailor mounted the rigging, Editha approached the side and strained her sight towards the strange sail.

Digitized by Google

"Methinks she is a Saxon vessel," cried he aloft.

"The devil!" replied the man at the helm. "All hands on deck, or by St. Olaf we shall be kidnapped; the dogs are all asleep—what ho there!"

The Vala who had been carefully watching Pecquigny, now came close to Editha and whispered "It is Canute! we shall yet escape."

The men gathered on deck; they mustered strong, for few, except the leaders, had been on shore from that ship: Tostig knowing the danger of re-embarking in face of an enemy, had kept his own ship complete and full, lest in the scramble he might be obliged to sail weakly manned, and perhaps be forced to give battle singly.

When the crew were assembled, Editha saw with terror the numbers and fierceness of the company.

The chief officer thus addressed them:

"If this is a Saxon ship, we shall probably defeat and capture her; but know ye all my lads, that no Saxon ship bears down as this does upon a foe without being well able to maintain the combat. Be prepared then for a fight. Will you stand and fall by your banner, or will ye fly?"

"We will fight!" But then, suddenly a supernatural yell seemed to issue from the topmast: all started in surprise.

"In God's name what is that?" said Editha to the Vala, who stood motionless and dumb. The crew stared at each other.

Again the fearful screech fell upon them from unseen lips.

A third time it arose as on the blast above them, and ended with a loud laugh.

The Scandinavians shook with terror

"The God of mercies has heard my prayers and sent an invisible spirit to my aid," thought Editha. The Vala stood calm and silent by her side, but a faint smile was perceptible on her curled lip as Editha's eyes fell upon her.

"By Odin 'twas the spirit of Loke," whispered the steersman to the chief officer. "I have heard it before a wreck; it laughs when evil is upon men."

"No Octa! 'twas Odin," answered the chief; "he laughs to see that Christian boat fall in our way; we shall destroy them all."

Digitized by Google

"'Tis a Valchyrie, I tell thee man," cried the Vala; "I know their voices in the wind; I have heard them ring through the Norwegian hills in my youth. They bode good to us. They are ever heard by those to whom they portend luck. But hush my friends! never do they give these yells without some warning words following; we shall again hear the voice of the spirit. List ye! list ye!"

All was hushed on board that solitary boat; nought but the dash of the surge and the dreary whistle of the wind as it flew in swift course through the cordage, was heard. The Vala's keen grey eyes swept the offing, and ere any other perceived it she saw a second boat appear.

Again the spirit-scream burst forth, and with supernatural shrillness these words were heard on high:—

> "Two to one are fearful odds;
> Trust in Scandinavian gods;
> Bide the battle or ye die;
> Norweglans, trust the Valchyrie!"

"Ha! but there is only one boat," exclaimed Pecquigny and the chief together.

At that instant down fell the sailor from the masthead, senseless upon the deck. Terrified by the voice, he had fainted. The fall stunned him, but he recovered speech sufficiently to articulate, "The spirit! the Valchyrie!" and expired.

"There is the second boat!" cried the Vala, and she pointed it out.

"By Odin, but the Valchyrie is right!" exclaimed the chief; "there is a second boat."

"Yet we must not fly," said the Vala; "bide the battle, or ye die."

"Curse the Valchyrie," cried Pecquigny. "What! fight two ships with one? No no! make for Ostend sirs: it is our only hope."

"Have ye not proof of the prophecy?" said the Vala.

"Proof of the devil!" retorted Pecquigny.

The altercation extended; many of the crew were for battle, many against it. The Vala whispered to Editha,—

Digitized by Google

"This quarrel must be furthered; the Saxon boats gain fast upon us, it is Canute."

Editha fell upon her knees in prayer to God: meanwhile the crew grew fierce in argument, and the Saxons bore down rapidly.

"By the tail of the devil," cried Pecquigny, "but ye are mad! we shall be destroyed if ye heed the Valchyrie. See! see how those vessels gain upon us!" and he stamped with rage and fear.

"Go to the topmast, some one," said the chief; "and make out what they are."

No one moved.

"To the tops, some of ye! dogs what do you stare for?" No man stirred: all were silent.

"Get thee up Sweyn; away to the tops man, and examine those vessels."

"What! go up to the Valchyrie and be cast down as that poor fellow was!" and Sweyn pointed to the dead sailor. "I would sooner fight the two boats myself. Close quarters with man or maid, an ye will, but not with a spirit."

"Knave obey my orders!"

"Not to be clapped alongside of a spirit master, if Tostig himself were here."

"What! dost mutiny?"

"No! Sweyn is a true sailor, and bids defiance to man, woman, and all other beasts, by order of his officer. Flesh to flesh! blood to blood! bone to bone! but to face a Valchyrie will I not, for no man! Go thyself, if thou wilt."

The master liked the Valchyrie as little as his men: he no longer pressed his order, the dispute again begun and the wind freshened.

The two Saxons were now plainly seen, full of armed men and making straight for the Norwegian ship, which, however, was much larger than either of them. But "two to one are fearful odds," cried many voices, and as the Saxons approached, all the other part of the Valchyrie's doggrel seemed to be forgotten. Two to one—fearful odds, passed echoing from man to man, till at last the most resolute yielded to the clamour of Pecquigny; the steersman put up

Digitized by Google

the helm, and away the ship went round upon the other tack.

"Cowards fly,
Cowards die!
But the brave,
Rule the wave."

This chant rising on the blast, in the Valchyrie's shrill ominous tones again petrified all with fear.

"Turn and fight, like true Scandinavians," cried the Vala loudly; but fear had become panic; the voice of the spirit and that of the Vala only added to the terror which seemed to inspire all with a desire to fly.

"Out oars, out oars!" was the cry, for the wind had suddenly failed, as the Valchyrie's last chant arose, and the sails flapped idly against the mast. The Saxon boats did the like.

Some Norwegians murmured that the Saxon praying woman was in league with the spirit against them.

"Curse their hearts" said the Vala to herself, "this is what I dreaded; but I will save her yet."

Muttering these words she descended rapidly between decks and unseen, for all eyes were fixed upon the enemy; but while she was below, the murmur against Editha run through the crew.

"She is a sorceress, a she-devil."

"She is too pretty."

"Too pretty! why man the devil takes that form oftener than any other."

"By St. Olaf 'twould be best to strip and throw her overboard."

As the speaker said this, the Vala rose from below, and after awhile came aft.

Editha heard all that passed.

"Frica," said she in a whisper, "they will throw me overboard, they threaten to strip me, I will not bear that. God forgive me if I do wrong, but I will throw myself over rather than have my person exposed by these inhuman monsters. But God will still protect me; he has not sent these Saxons to witness my death. If I leap over, dear Frica, throw something after me to which I can cling; there is a hencoop, keep near it, and when you see me

Digitized by Google

leap cast it over. Thus I may float till the Saxon boat reaches me."

"Yea, verily will I," answered the Vala in the same under-voice, and then, unperceived by the crew, continued her occupation of coiling a rope; "and with the hencoop Frica will fling herself also maiden; for our fates are bound together."

"Noble Frica do not so; save yourself to tell Harold that Editha's last thought was of him; her last prayer for his glory and the safety of the Saxon people. Tell him also, that I fear not death unbecomingly. I know I am doomed: hark! how they work themselves up to the cruel deed."

"I will save you or die with you" said the Vala; "but be silent lady—speak not to me, for my work depends upon watching their words and their countenances, and I must time what I am about to the instant." She laid her hand kindly but unobservedly on Editha's arm as the latter stood thoughtful, with eyes in fixed attention on the men: so were the Vala's. Editha held the taffrail, resolved to leap if no other resource was left.

"I think she would be best in the sea, for by Hrymer the Saxons gain upon us like Nagelfar."

"It must be all her doing if that she be a she; but it's my clear opinion she's a devil."

"A devil would not pray," said the Vala.

"I don't know that," said a sailor; "I saw a cursed she-devil, like that, pray till all was blue in a storm we had; at last we had sense enough to cast her over the side, and a pretty job we had to do it, for the fiend was stronger than ten men. We could not loose her hold from the ship, she still clamouring for mercy, till I nicked her fingers with my knife, and beshrew me if she did not feel as hot as flames, and shrieked in a surprising manner: no natural woman would have made such a noise. When we whopped her into the sea, she disappeared—no splash, no nothing! She never touched the water."

"And when the witch was gone did ye thrive better?"

"Ay! ay! the storm stopped, and the sea was like a millpond."

Digitized by Google

"Why then let us cast this wench over, for the Saxons will have us else."

Here the Vala passed rapidly to another part of the vessel. Editha's heart quailed for a moment; but soon the Vala returned with eager mien, her mouth trembling with a nervous twitching motion: deadly pale she was, and seemed to breathe hard through her expanded stiffened nostrils. Meanwhile the mariners continued their brutal talk.

"Strip her first, off with her fine clothes, she will swim the lighter."

"Ay! ay! strip her and over," cried many voices; and a dozen moved towards Editha, who pallid as death grasped the taffrail firmly, ready to leap. Her majestic look and bearing, announcing the resolution of her great heart, checked the foremost, and a momentary silence ensued. Suddenly the shriek of the spirit, more shrill and fearful than before, was heard again; and these menacing words fell on their ears:—

"Touch the maid and ye shall die,
Consumed by fire out of the sea.
Fire shall from the waters rise,
Sent by the angry Valchyries.
Fire from fierce Muspelheim hot,
Fire eternal! be your lot."

As the words fell, a sparkling flame and a hissing sound arose, and an explosion like thunder shook the vessel, which was instantly covered with heavy smoke. The crew were confounded, several fell senseless, and again the spirit's chant filled the air:—

"If mortal dares to touch the queen,
No more that mortal shall be seen;
He dies in fire from the sea,
Struck by the angry Valchyrie."

The smoke cleared off, silence and horror reigned, and the rowers ceased to pull.

"Row! row!" cried the terrified Pecquigny, "we are lost if you do not pull!"

Digitized by Google

A loud fiendish laugh from the unseen spirit of the deep answered this appeal!

Now the Saxon boats came on amain, and the Norwegians again pulled with all force; yet the threatenings of the Valchyrie seemed to have destroyed their courage; they looked to oars only, and the French coast rose to the sight.

"Trim the vessel!" cried the master; "all lie down."

The men disposed of themselves in various parts of the ship, and lay down.

"Be silent, and move not," continued their commander; "all depends upon swiftness!"

"We gain upon them," said Pecquigny with great anxiety.

"I doubt it," replied his companion.

The three vessels cut through the smooth waters, and the regular splash of the oars alone broke the silence; but one of the Saxon boats evidently gained fast upon them. For two hours the chase lasted; then the Saxons pressed close, and their shouts from time to time were faintly heard as they cheered the strong rowers; then again, an awful silence reigned along the deep. Nearer and nearer came the Saxons now, their voices were plainly heard, the splash of their oars fell sharper upon the ear, the sound rolling over the surface with more distinct blows as the oar-blades dashed into the yielding waves.

Editha stood aloft on the poop, conspicuous.

"Lie down, lady," said Pecquigny.

"No monster! you may throw me in the sea if ye will, but here shall I stand till ye force me hence, and the struggle will impede the progress of your accursed ship."

"And I too am a woman, ruffians!" cried the Vala, discovering herself; "I am a Valchyrie, and command your fates! Who dares face Frica the Valchyrie?" cried she furiously and aloud, as she threw off her sailor's jerkin and iron skull-cap, letting loose her grey and dishevelled locks, and raising her naked sinewy arms on high; then with a cry so loud and shrill that it seemed to reach the very horizon she called to the advancing boats:—

"Row Saxons, row! your queen and the Vala are here!" A terrific shout answered the appeal, and re-

Digitized by Google

doubled blows of the oars told the hopes and fears of the respective crews.

"Accursed she-devil!" cried Pecquigny, running at the Vala, "let thy cursed throttle croak in the deep."

Editha shrieked, but too late; ere the Vala could turn, Pecquigny pushed her overboard. Unable to prevent this, Editha at once cast over the hencoop provided for herself; the Vala caught it and floated.

"Fear not lady" she cried, "the villain has failed."

"By the devil's tail I have not yet done with you, brimstone," answered Pecquigny, and seizing a bow sent an arrow at the Vala. With a sure glance she saw its course, and as it whizzed past her head, caught the flying mischiet and shook it at him: then her deep voice rose from the water:—

"Norman dog! a Valchyrie cannot be killed; but the attempt can and shall be avenged. Thou shalt hereafter be flayed alive—tremble!" The wretch slunk away, sorry that he had dared her anger and failed to kill her. Passing Editha he hissed in her ear: "Curses on thee for the assistance thou gave: but I will have vengeance!"

Frica was soon reached by the leading Saxon boat, but she waved it off, crying out: "Row, row! save the queen, heed not the Vala, the boat astern will save me—row then, row! but kill not Pecquigny, he is mine"—the gallant boat dashed on.

"Glorious Vala! by Odin, the king will reward thee," shouted a voice, and a large broken oar was cast over for her. She thrust it through the hencoop, and thus floated until the second boat picked her up.

"Oh mighty Loke!" she exclaimed, on reaching the deck, "thy worshipper, Pecquigny, shall pay for this."

"Pecquigny! Pecquigny!" cried Canute, for it was his boat; "Pecquigny! is he not dead?"

"No! beshrew the ruffian's heart, he is in that vessel, and cast me into the sea; for that Gangrader and Vafthrudner shall gnaw his bones; but row Saxons, row! the villains are numerous and strong."

"Fear not brave Vala! they cannot escape; the first boat will find them work until we get up; and then! Fenris help their throats."

Digitized by Google

Now with exultant shouts the broad-shouldered oarsmen made the strong blades bend with the weight of waters, and quivering sent the sparkling drops abroad; the vessel bounded on and dashed the wild spray from its bows. Furiously also drove the Norwegian boat, but the pursuers closed fast, and both sides prepared for the fight. Confusion was evident at first on board the Scandinavian, yet it soon subsided into the silent, awful expectation of battle. The sound of the faster-splashing oars alone broke the stillness.

Editha stood high on the stern of the vessel, and the Saxon boat came foaming on, seeming to partake of the fury of the crew that urged its forward course. A tall man, in complete armour, stood balanced on the extremity of a far-protruded oar, ready to leap into the hostile vessel; and other oars were also pushed out, on each of which stood a hero, with shield and battle-axe.

When the tall warrior saw Editha on the stern, he cried out,—

"Let no shaft fly from your bows! Look! look! yonder is your queen, Saxons! Your battle-axes must decide the fight."

"Merciful God! it is Harold," cried Editha, and she dropped on her knees with clasped hands stretched towards heaven; then springing to her feet, she cried aloud: "Shoot, shoot! fear not!" and flung herself at full length upon the deck.

The bowmen of the *Avenger* now crowded on to the poop, discharging their arrows at the tall warrior and his companions, who, raising their broad strong shields, defied them. Editha heard the twanging of their bowstrings and shuddered, for she knew the mark they shot at; but her courage returned when she heard the voice of Harold crying aloud,—

"Caitiffs! down with your standard; restore the queen and you shall have mercy and ransom to boot."

"And safety," cried Pecquigny, "for all on board?"

"Ay! and reward!" but if ye resist, by the God of battles I will flay you all alive!"

"Oh! let us submit at once!" cried Pecquigny.

"Submit, thou Norman cur!" said the commander,

Digitized by Google

calmly, "I will capture them!" Then turning, he cried out, "'Tis Harold, the king! we are twice his strength, and our fortunes are made if we take him." An exultant shout instantly arose; it was as loudly returned by the Saxons, whose boat now steered close up, and Harold's voice was heard: "Hold firm, comrades!" and at the word, he leaped from the protruded oar on which he stood, and with a mighty bound stood on the deck of the Norwegian! Numbers threw themselves upon him, but his chosen companions were almost simultaneously at his side, and as they struggled for footing their followers ran along the lifted oars and boarded, while their glancing boat brushed away the *Avenger's* oars, breaking them like rotten sticks. Meanwhile Harold had gained a secure footing, and his terrible battle-axe was whirling with resistless force. Sparks flew and blood spouted at every descent of the crashing blade: he bestrode the prostrate form of Editha, he cleaved the skull of the Norwegian commander, and drew his reeking weapon from his throat, exclaiming, "Editha, Editha! my life, my soul! are you unhurt?"

"Yes, yes! heed me not; look to yourself my Harold."

As she spoke her eyes fell on the treacherous Pecquigny standing behind Harold with fell intent to stab him: springing to her feet with a loud cry, and catching a seax lying on the deck, she pushed it into Pecquigny's face. Steady was her arm, the weapon went into one cheek, and passing between his teeth as he gasped in fear, passed out at the other cheek, thus gagging him: one cry of terror he gave as she drew it back, and then fell.

"Now wretch thou shalt die and haunt me no more!"

She raised her seax, but the prostrate miscreant, clasping his hands together, uttered such an indistinct cry for mercy, spitting gore from his wounded mouth, that her woman's feelings prevailed, and she turned with a feeling of horror to watch Harold, who was driving the enemy along the deck. The resistance was desperate; but soon the consort boat approached, the oarsmen straining every nerve, and the armed men madly shouting when they saw their king fighting against superior numbers. Desperate was the battle, and bounding with superhuman agility, striking down

Digitized by Google

armed men at every blow, Harold whirled his axe without diminution of vigour, its biting edge smiting hideously. Suddenly the handle broke! but scarcely had he perceived the accident when Editha was at his side and placed her seax in his hand.

"Behind me Editha! get behind me! Elstan, guard the queen," were his few words; and with the lighter weapon his hand more rapidly plied his yielding foes.

At this moment the consort's men leaped on to the deck, and the Vala, foremost, flew to Editha, giving her a shield; then with her wild voice and unearthly shrieks she animated the fight: soon it ended; the Norwegians, bending before the mighty force of Harold, threw down their arms and called for mercy.

Harold clasped Editha with feelings of delirious force; but suddenly recovering his self-command, gave orders to make for the shore, lest Tostig's fleet should arrive.

While distributing the captives in the three vessels, the Vala approached him.

"Vala!" said the king, "thy conduct was grand! Claim any reward Harold can bestow."

"Mighty Harold! if the Vala has rendered thee good service, be it so; she claims at thy hand the prisoner Pecquigny. Keep thy promise!"

"What! the villain Pecquigny! Why Editha, didst thou not tell me that Auvrai Gigaut hanged him in the prison?"

"Yea" said Editha; "but the horrid monster is here, and I still shudder at his name."

"By Odin! Frica, my word is pledged. But thou must not let the knave live."

"Live!" cried the Vala; "'tis not to preserve him that I ask for the hell-hound. His insults to the Lady Editha, his taunts, his threats of how he would treat her, are in my memory; and did not he throw me overboard! I vowed to him out of the wave that he should be flayed,—he shall be so, and my dogs shall rend him: they shall have their feast."

Pecquigny, bound hand and foot near them, heard; he groaned in despair, he prayed Editha to save him, and she did beg his life, but Harold stopped her.

Digitized by Google

"My kingly word has been passed: the monster must be delivered over to death. Take him hence Frica, let him be put on board Canute's vessel; but if we are chased he must not escape."

"Trust to Canute and to me!" and the Vala had the wretch hoisted into the other ship.

"Ha! ha! old Sinister-eye!" said Canute as the villain was lowered into his boat, "so hell would not hold thee, and thou com'st back like a bad byzant."

Pecquigny moaned heavily.

"Hear the rascal, how he groans!" cried Elstan. "By the rood! he seems to think his friend the devil will have him to the home fireside at last! But tell us, thou cut-throat, how gat thou free of that neck-cloth Sir Auvrai tied for thee? Surely I heard the death-rattle in thy gullet?"

Pecquigny answered not.

"What! has't tine thy tongue with that douse i' the chops, lad? Let's see if we cannot make thee jabber."

The merciless Saxon seized a rope and twisted it tight round the head of the wounded man, who soon roared with agony.

"What, gossip! hast found thee tongue then!" And the sailors around laughed at the wretch's sufferings.

"Spoil not his skin!" interposed the Vala, "'tis mine: the skin of a murderer is potent in my spells, and I would have it free of rents."

"I'll not hurt a hair of his head," retorted the huntsman. Here he gave a fresh twist to the rope, and made his victim yell horribly.

"Wilt speak then, neighbour?"

"Yes! yes! what wilt thou have?"

"Tell thy adventures after we left thee dangling in the prison like a trout?" The huntsman slackened the torturing rope.

"The jailer got loose, and cut me down. He had been once a barber-leech; he bled me and rubbed my throat till I gave signs of life."

"Ay! ay!" muttered the Vala; "but when I have done with thee thou shalt have no skin to rub."

"And when Hudson rubbed thy life back into thee man,

Digitized by Google

was he not afraid of the devil being angry? Well, how didst feel thyself after half-hanging—didst go to bed?"

"Yes, many weeks in bed; I am not yet recovered."

"Well, well! thee hast thy luck of it, old boy! the Vala will be thy nurse now; thee wilt be as happy as a prince with her, she will make thee both sing and dance!"

"And strip to thy work besides," said Canute.

As they jeered Pecquigny, the man aloft cried out, "A sail! a sail!"

"A fleet! a fleet!" was re-echoed from the masthead of Harold's ship.

"Now oars befriend us!" said the king, as they pushed for the British coast.

The fleet was Tostig's: it bore down towards the boats; but the wind, light and variable, was not favourable, and the Saxons flew swiftly towards the English coast. Still the fleet neared them, for it was closer in shore. Then Harold steered straight for those terrible sands, which had till within a few years formed great part of his family possessions. He well knew that when the sea swallowed his lands, with one terrible convulsion, whirlpools and shallows and dangers vexed the coast; but he knew them all when a boy, and when a man, had with his father strived to save great portions. He now thought that if he could once entangle Tostig's fleet in the shoals, he could himself escape by his superior knowledge. Wherefore, he ordered his two consorts to follow in his wake, and directed his course athwart the line on which the fleet were making progress.

At first this gave the latter a decided advantage, and the fleet closed upon Harold's boats as they got off the South Foreland. Then began the race, the desperate struggle for life! crown! Editha! Tostig's fleet knew the captured Norwegian, and from the company she was in, and her flight, that she had been taken by the Saxons. Harold's boat had picked rowers, men of unrivalled strength and skill; but his other vessel was inferior in swiftness and men. The Norwegian was admirable, though more heavy, and still well manned, for many of her crew had joined Harold.

The king and Editha sat on the poop, until neared by the

Digitized by Google

enemy; then he made her disguise herself, as she well knew how, an art learned from the Vala. The Vala sat also on the poop, her elbows on her knees, her chin resting on her clenched hands, her lips compressed, and as usual with her when agitated, the skin of her nose drawn tightly across the narrow bridge: distended were her nostrils, her brow lowered, and her grey keen eyes fixed upon the chasing squadron. Every now and then she turned with a fierce glance towards Pecquigny; a sharp seax was by her side, and he, bound hand and foot, and almost dead with terror at his inevitable fate, was close at her feet. She looked upon him as one condemned by God and man, and that it was decreed by Odin she should be his executioner; her private spells also assured her that if he escaped he would be her destroyer. Her intent was to kill him at once if danger pressed, otherwise to reserve him for her dogs.

In the third boat was Elstan, with two young Saxon thanes, both experienced seamen and relatives to the king. Other thanes, of whom there were several, sailed in all the boats.

In silence the barques glided through the deep, not a sound was heard but the splashing of oars. Once only Harold spoke aloud.

"No shout of encouragement Saxons! ye well know what depends upon you—your monarch, your queen, your lives. I see you strain to the oar with a power almost beyond nature, and I glory in your strength and will." An awful silence succeeded, every heart beating with the resolve to die rather than trust the cruel Tostig.

The Norse fleet came on with great swiftness, and loud hurrahs rent the air in union with the sounding oars.

Harold had now got into the along-shore track, as he had designed, and though the enemy's leading ship was scarce a bow-shot from the *Avenger*, it had no longer the advantage of crossing Harold's line: the king had thus far succeeded. All now depended upon oars until he could reach the dangerous part of the coast, which he trusted soon to do.

"Pull! pull! like fiends of hell!" cried Tostig; "the caitiffs will be ours; hurrah!" and loud answering shouts echoed from the head to the stern of his ship.

Digitized by Google

When the sound fell upon the ears of the Saxons, they could not quietly bear the insult and responded with a cheer as loud, as long, and as fearless.

"Curses be upon these rascally prisoners, why should we carry them?" cried the Saxon thane who commanded the *Avenger*, on board which were all Tostig's men, except Pecquigny; "cast them overboard and lighten our ship."

"Ay, ay, sir thane," answered Elstan, "as willingly as if they were Normans."

"Let them swim to their friends," said another sailor; "but strip them first: their clothes weigh nothing, these will we carry to oblige them till they call again."

"For my part" said a third, "I would slit their weasands ere we cast them loose; they killed twelve of our best men, and we have had no satisfaction for their lives yet."

"No, Haco! No! thou art always for cutting throats. The murrain light on thee man! have we not got their ship. Arn't that satisfaction?"

"Ay! ay!" cried the thanes; "no cutting of throats, strip the knaves, shove them over, and cast a spar or two to float upon."

Sixty prisoners were stripped and cast into the sea, but with some spars and a coop or two, and as most of them could swim, all managed to float until Tostig came up.

"Don't take them up; row! row! we cannot stop for them, the dogs!" cried the ruthless chief, and several vessels passed on, but those behind saved them. This lightening of the *Avenger* gave her greater speed. Tostig still gained a little, and his archers began to shoot at the Saxons, who returned their shots, but without hurt to either side, and soon the shoals were gained.

Harold, with an experienced eye, led through the narrow channel boldly; there was not an inch of water to spare, and his companions kept strictly in his wake. Tostig was, however, also aware of the difficulties, and following exactly soon reached Elstan's ship; a sharp skirmish took place, but Tostig passed on, breaking many of the *Avenger's* oars, and calling to his followers to engage her, pursued Canute.

Neither Harold nor Canute could put their ships about in the straitened channel, nor would Harold have risked Editha's safety, opposing such a fleet.

Digitized by Google

The Vala saw Tostig approach.

"Now dog, die! Gangrader and Vafthrudner must lose their dinner." She arose, seized the seax, and shook it in Pecquigny's face. "Thou wilt maltreat the Lady Editha, wilt thou, villain? She shall, when dishonoured, serve among thy menials? she shall bend to thy will in the days of her beauty, and be thy mockery and scorn in those of her decay? Ha, ha, ha, Pecquigny! thou art a false prophet. Have I time to flay him, think ye, Saxons, ere the foe be upon us?"

"Begin! begin! thou canst but cut his throat if they get upon us before thy job be done Vala."

"Oh save me, save me, save me!" screamed Pecquigny.

"Thy friend the devil may, if he can, but he has no time to lose;" and she seized him by the throat. At this moment one arrow from Tostig's ship whizzed past her head, and another struck into Pecquigny's body: he screamed with greater vehemence than before, and his yells were heard by all the ships.

"By Odin!" said Harold, "that is the Vala doing her will upon Pecquigny; he deserves it, but better she should kill him at once."

"Ha!" said Frica, as the arrow passed her head, "the Valchyries warn me to be quick. Die devil!" and she thrust the seax into Pecquigny's throat. "Thou art safe now. Loke himself, with all his cunning, cannot get thee back into life; but I will keep thy skin if I can, so lie there, we may escape yet." Then she dipped her hands in his warm weltering blood, and muttered magic words. "The hot blood of an assassin has great power in divination," she said, drawing a sanguinary circle around her. "See, the smoke of his gore ascends! 'Tis grateful to the spirits of darkness. Accept it ye powers! and let the future and the truth burst upon my brain. Thrice I invoke ye! 'tis rarely that the sorceress can make ye such an offering."

She continued her incantations, casting her spells for a while within the bloody circle she had drawn upon the deck. Suddenly she cried aloud,—

"Saxons, the hour is ours. Pull! pull!"

As she spake, many vessels entered the channel; but in

Digitized by Google

the midst of the fight, now hot with the *Avenger*, Tostig's second ship having grappled with her, another fleet hove in sight.

"There comes Gurth, by all the heroes of Asgaard!" shouted Harold, and his shout passed from ship to ship.

"The Saxon fleet! the Saxon fleet!"

The sound carried dismay to the hearts of Tostig's men. But a side channel, known to Tostig himself was open: he rowed for that, ordering his ships to follow. Harold had passed it, and could not turn to defend the strait. Meanwhile the wind had got up and many of Tostig's ships went aground upon the shoals, for the tide was out. Canute tried to give sternway to his vessel, and plied Tostig with arrows; he even launched the small boats, and attempted to board, but with desperate resistance he was beaten off. Tostig then gained the transverse channel, and joined those ships which had not entered among the shoals. He soon got into deep water, and the thanes who commanded Elstan's ship, seeing, that if a calm, or any accident, should prevent their own fleet coming up, she could not be saved, made a furious assault upon the vessel which had grappled to their stern, and carried it; then throwing their prisoners overboard, and manning the prize, they followed Harold. He now made for the coast, landed Editha, and sent his vessels back to join Gurth in attacking Tostig's fleet; but night came on with a heavy gale, and at daylight the fleets were no longer in sight of each other.

The dreadful excitement Editha had felt prevented her thoughts from fixing on any event that was not actually before her sight during the fight; but when she was once more safe with Harold, the death of her father came fresh to her mind, her spirits sunk, and a lowness proportioned to the great strain followed: fever attacked her brain; she raved about Alfnoth, his mortal wound was before her imagination in all its horror, and the delirium was violent. At length she became tranquil; a deep sleep fell upon her, and she awoke composed and rational.

"My Editha!" said the king, a few days after her convalescence, "this kingdom is in great peril, and though I feel confidence, man is mortal, and the results of battles are

Digitized by Google

doubtful. Thou hast often said to me, '*The battle is not to the strong.*' Now the Saxons are strong; but if the strong lose the battle, what becomes of England? a prey to Scandinavians in the north, Normans in the south! Nothing but the greatest exertions can save us: thou art now out of danger, and my time must be devoted to the defence of the country; yet, after so many accidents, I dread to leave thee except as queen, and with authority to act in my absence. The labour and excitement of celebrating our nuptials in public I know thou art not yet capable of supporting: wilt thou consent to our union in a private manner, in the palace?"

"The ceremony concerns me not, dear Harold; I am thy wife before God, and to do thy bidding in all things is the object of Editha's soul; her duty before God, before the king, and before her husband. Yes! let us be joined by the Church in holy wedlock; and if, by being queen of the Saxons, I can assist thee in preparing for their defence, more welcome if possible will be our union."

Harold threw his arms around the lovely woman who thus worshipped him. Then he felt that next to trust in the Omnipresent, such a being was man's best comfort; that woman is sent by Heaven to help us through the gloom of life.

The following day Editha was queen of England.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLII.

When you would your wise men teach,
Call a council, make a speech:
When you're troubled with a fool,
Send the booby straight to school.

HAROLD sat in council. An armed man entered: he had ridden far and hard.

"O king, the land is invaded. Tostig landed in Yorkshire; Morcar broke his battle, and drove him from the Humber: but he is in force, and will return."

"Yea" cried Harold, "he will return. Noble thanes, Tostig is brave and persevering, and forgiveness is not in his nature. He might have remained lord of the North if he would have been merciful and just: he would not; he is a tyrant, and shall rule no Saxons. Who shall protect the poor if their sovereign abandons them? O! thanes, many are the kings who have abandoned their people; but when and where did the people ever abandon a just, wise, and virtuous monarch? Let this lesson be our guide. If a people rebel the king knows that his ministers are bad, and 'tis his duty to remedy the wrong; and holy and kingly it is to do so. Let him punish also: not the people driven to madness, but those who oppress them. To effect this he must be deaf to ministers; for they, being the real culprits, will bewilder him with falsehoods; he must listen to his people. That did I when the Northumbrians rose against Tostig. Yet insurgents must be held in check, for they will commit wild and horrid excesses; they cannot help it: they rise against wrong, are passionate, and under no control. Do them justice and they will be steadfast. I have done them justice, and fear not Tostig's invasion. Noble thanes, be just to your people, and with wisdom and courage we may defy Tostig and William of Normandy; but if misfortune befall us—and even Alfred was defeated, those

Digitized by Google

who survive will lament our deaths, and rank us with the heroes of old. Thanes, ye shall live victoriously or die gloriously with Harold. What would ye more?"

Three hundred thanes sat armed in council on that day; and as Harold concluded his address, they arose with one burst, one shout of approbation.

When that great shout and the striking of shields subsided, the voice of Stigand arose:—

"Let us trust in the arm of the Lord!" the prelate cried, and raised his eyes and hands towards heaven.

"And in this also!" cried Harold, with a voice that rung through the vast hall, as he cast, with a whirl, his ponderous battle-axe upon the table round which they sat.

"Even so! for the Lord of Hosts bestows both the weapon and the arm that wields it. Shame be upon the craven who rejects the gifts of the Almighty One," said Wulfnoth, bishop of Worcester.

"Amen!" answered the assembly.

"To your posts then thanes!" said Harold, "complete your armaments; let your vassals be perfect in arms. Give rank and leading to the old soldiers who fought by my side in Wales, and to those who accompanied me during my exile in Ireland; they are accustomed to war; they will teach the young soldiers that few can bear company with their king. When in arms and on foot he pursues an enemy, the horsemen are left behind. My old warriors will tell them that Harold neither eats, nor drinks, nor takes rest till his soldiers are provided for. They will remember Abermarlies, where we passed the Towey against Griffith of Wales. 'When you hear my war-shout,' said the Saxon chief that day, 'shame be on the man whose foot is dry!' then leaping through the waters, he slew a foe on the opposite bank. Yes, thanes! my war-shout was then heard, and no Saxon's foot was dry! What the general then did, the king will do now. There are amongst you thanes who with me raised the stones of victory in the kingdom of Devyt; and on the field of Abermarlies a pyramid records our deeds; tell that to your young warriors!

"Now, when you hear of invasion and that I have left my capital, bend your rapid marches upon the enemy; but

Digitized by Google

till I move stir not; let the warriors of the menaced district defend themselves, for if I quit not London be assured it is only one of Tostig's descents. When a serious landing happens, Harold will be there.

"William and Hardraada the Norseman, that wandering giant, mean to land simultaneously; but winds and waves will not be ruled, on the battle-axe and seax depends the fate of the land."

With a shout the assembly answered the king, and separated. Then were seen armed lords and chiefs on every road leading from the capital, leaving Harold, with his brothers, to provide for the armies and look to the revenue; and so well was the last managed, that the king, while furnishing all things necessary for the war, actually reduced some taxes. His popularity was thereby much augmented, especially with the poorer classes; for from the rich taxation only takes luxuries, from the labourers it takes the necessaries of life, they become demoralized by suffering, and the two classes are at variance—an unnatural state! But Harold, a wise and great man, reduced taxation, and under him rich and poor locked shield and shield. Strict was he also in purifying the channels of justice, well knowing that oppression makes a nation miserable in peace, feeble in war. "To want armour is bad," said Harold; "to want friends is worse, and injustice has no friends."

Another care remained. "Editha," said the king, "that poor youth, the Atheling, must have fair usage: we will have him well instructed. I have created him earl of Oxford; and if the scholars can make him fit to rule the Saxons, by Odin! he shall have the crown. But to put our fate now into his keeping would be an act of greater imbecility than the youth himself could commit: it would be an unrighteous deed to cast the fate of millions into the keeping of a poor creature who could no more encounter Duke William and Tostig than he could grasp moonlight. Yet again, Editha, I say, that when the storm shall be over, and the Saxons victors, the crown shall be Edgar's, if his weak head can be fitted to bear it. The crown is his right, if he can do the duties of a sovereign in peace. If war again arises, in me the Saxons can again find a sword and shield. Canst thou,

Digitized by Google

loved Editha, make up thy mind to take the diadem from that fair brow, and, crowned with thy golden locks alone, live with thy Harold at Bosenham Castle?"

"Yea my Harold! not only could Editha do this, but, to speak God's truth, the happiest day of Editha's life would be that in which she abandoned a crown to have thee alone in quiet and in peace."

"What Editha! not one sigh!"

"No Harold! not one; joy in all the fulness of joy."

"Nay, nay! thou wouldst not give it up so meekly; thy high Saxon blood would mantle when men spoke of the queen. Thou wouldst say, '*I* am queen!' and sighs would follow."

"By heaven and earth, I swear to thee it is not so! My garden, my household, and thy company, will be more to Editha than all the pomp of a court. Now I bear it; now I take pride in it, because no woman could serve you with such love as Editha; but for no other reason. We have been in battle together, and I felt no fear but for you; and when again in danger, Editha will again be at your side, if such be her fitting post; for wherever she can assist you best, there will she be. The arm of a woman is weak, but her mind is not feeble; her blows avail not in battle, but she can lead men to where the battle is, and there urge them to glorious deeds. If I am beautiful—know Harold, that a beautiful queen can make brave soldiers; he has not the heart of a warrior that is not inspired by the sight of a young and beautiful queen! Nay! nay! laugh not Harold; I tell thee I can lead an army as well as thyself. Where Editha looks on, the Saxons will not fly. The bravest will follow Harold in the fight, but the timid will not dare to abide the reproaches of the Saxon queen at the head of her maidens! Yet, think not Harold, I am ignorant that defeat and death may be our lot."

"But Editha! Death must reach us in Bosenham as certainly as on a throne."

"Yes Harold! but then we go not forth to seek him; we abide his coming in peace and happiness, unattended with anxieties and dangers!"

"May Heaven bless thee, beloved Editha! But tranquillity

Digitized by Google

may not be; the storm directed against this unhappy land will not pass over lightly or quickly, the trial will be terrible and long. Now let me tell thee my plans:—Where the enemy first lands with intent to hold his ground, there will I meet him in person with whatever forces can be assembled at the moment. Stigand is true to the house of Godwin; he is both interested and able to advise you well; his fate is bound up with mine, and if he thinks your presence in London be required to keep down personal enemies who may traitorously aid the Normans by setting up Edgar, then Editha remain here. If not, put yourself at the head of the reserve, and march to my assistance."

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Edgar Atheling.

"Good den to the king and queen!" said the youth, smiling. "I have sought your grace to give thanks for creating me earl of Oxford."

"'Tis no great honour Edgar. Thou well knowest thou art the Atheling, and of the race of Cerdic; but thy youth and inexperience render thee unfit to fill the throne in such a moment as this. Thou knowest also, Edgar, that at all times the Saxons have insisted on the right to choose their kings, and they have chosen me; not because they do not love thee and thy race, but that this time of danger demands a warrior's sceptre—a battle-axe. Noble youth, I would exalt thee, wouldst thou but study and fit thyself for tranquil rule, like Edgar the Peaceful. I tell thee, boy," and Harold spoke with a solemn tone as he fixed his piercing eyes upon the youth, laying a hand upon his shoulder, "I tell thee that if thou dost well prepare thy mind for government; and that if I defeat our Norman foe, thou shalt be placed on the throne of thy ancestors. Harold soars for glory beyond a crown; to be great as a warrior and a just judge is what he seeks; and he cares little for a crown, if, by surrendering it, he can add to his renown."

"King and father! speak not thus to me; I am not born to rule. No desire have I to be king; give me the means of living in splendour; give me horses and hawks, and let me live in peace at Oxford, enjoying life, loving you and Editha, and my friends Morcar and Edwin—taking my

Digitized by Google

pleasures without care or trouble. Were I king now, my first order would be that you should take command of all things, to save me trouble. Edward gave much to you, but he took some trouble; now I would take none, and have often wondered why he took any, seeing that he did not take all!"

Editha smiled at the frankness of Edgar.

"Atheling," she said, "thy heart and mine yearn after peace! Methinks you are wise in all you say; I too hate a crown, dear youth; but the Saxons require Harold, and Editha is his servant. He is not like us; he loves the excitement of command, he loves to plan the public welfare; he will give thee the crown Atheling; but if, as thy gentle goodness makes me believe, thou speakest truth thou wilt often wish thyself a subject: yet still Editha tells thee to recollect the high Saxon blood in thy veins. Labour good youth at thy books, and learn how to make England happy, if fortune gives us victory over the Normans."

The young Atheling kneeled at the feet of Editha, and taking her hands in his kissed them.

"Truly hast thou judged of Edgar; but indeed lady, I am averse to books; I love hounds, and hawks, and horses; and I see no need to learn, for I will not be king. I would not lose my pleasures for royal rule, nor be so unjust to the good Saxons as to mount a throne I am not fit to fill, and should hate. Be king—no! Go with Harold to battle—yes, if he so wishes; but I like not war and troubles. Yet not from fear of danger; the Atheling will not flee from combat; but his wish is not to join in battle unless Harold so wills."

"I will it not," said Harold, and a smile of repressed contempt curled on his lip; "I would not risk thy life, Atheling. Wert thou to die, men would say I slew thee, as they accused my father of slaying Alfred. I wish not thy death, but life and happiness, and the throne if the fates give us victory. Wert thou capable of wresting the sceptre from me I would never have claimed it. Thy lineage, if added to experience and a character to command, would place the Saxon people at thy feet instead of at mine; in truth it would place me there also."

Digitized by Google

Saying these words Harold held out his hand to the Atheling, who pressed it to his lips, saying,—

"Harold, to thee the Atheling swears before thy queen and in the presence of God, that he will live and die thy faithful subject! But it is time to go; my hawks wait for me. Lady Editha, how I love that fellow Elstan! there is not such a huntsman in England."

"He is a brave and faithful vassal," observed she.

"And hates the Normans as he hates Loke himself," added Harold.

"Yea, that he does; but I never talk much with him except about hunting. He told me he was with you in Normandy; but I forget all about it, except that in crossing some river you saved three Norman knights from drowning, by lifting them, armour and all, in your arms, which, he said, no Norman could have done."

"I did so Edgar, and was proud of doing so, for the Normans are noble warriors."

"Duke William is very strong, I have heard," observed the Atheling.

"Yes, very! stronger, it may be, than myself," replied Harold.

"Well, so I said to Elstan, but he does not think so. 'Why did not William pull the knights out of the river?' is what Elstan said to me: 'Harold and he were together, and our king saved the duke's men: who then is strongest and bravest?'

"'But the duke pulls a stronger bow than any Saxon,' said I to Elstan; 'how he killed the deer called *Harold*, at Bodiam Castle.'"

Here the fair brow of the swan-necked queen was saddened; for the vision the Vala had presented to her eyes flashed across her mind.

"But," continued the youth, not observing her agitation, "Elstan says it was a trick, and done by witchcraft; for no man could have made such a shot unless the devil helped the arrow."

Harold laughed.

"I fear me," observed he to Edgar, "that Elstan deceives himself. The duke is the best and strongest bowman in

Digitized by Google

Europe; and all the Normans are good archers, as no doubt we shall soon find."

"How I should like to see the duke shoot!" said Edgar full of animation on the subject.

"Well," said Harold, again smiling, "come with me and thou shalt see the Normans shoot, I'll warrant thee; but the game they shall shoot at will not fly!"

"Pshaw—you mean in battle; I don't want that: but I should like to go to Normandy and hunt with them; even Elstan admits they are good sportsmen. I wish Harold thou wouldst create me head sportsman of England."

"By the rood! thou shalt be grand veneur of England, Edgar, if so thou wilt."

"O yes, that is what Edgar wants. But adieu! Elstan waits with the hawks—adieu!" So saying, the gentle Edgar left the king and queen, to pursue his own innocent pleasures, reckless alike of glory and of his rights.

The narrative of the brave old Sir William Mallet goes back to Normandy.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Holy candles have black wicks;
Guislebert knows the Papal tricks;
But the Pope is holy, so is his toe,
And Guislebert to Rome must go.

When the knight left the Normans in his story, to tell of the Saxon doings, he had shown how William, by his great genius, accomplished the first important steps preparatory to the great enterprise in contemplation.

These steps were, first getting money to meet the vast expense; secondly, to arousing a spirit of romantic daring—a spirit he felt in himself, and which he knew all Europe teemed with, if he could but call it forth in his cause.

The able way in which he effected this, said Sir William Mallet, I have already related. He enlisted and amalgamated romance, war, love, avarice, speculation, in all their forms; and he fortunately had personal strength, mental

Digitized by Google

energy, experience, and high fortunes, for undisputed command of all the chiefs whom he assembled around him. The mighty magician easily ruled the fierce spirits which his spells had called into action.

Now boy, I will tell thee how his incantations worked; I will describe the gathering of the warriors as they swarmed upon the Norman shores—a brilliant sight, which shall not be seen again till ages shall pass away. Thou shalt indite our passage of the seas, and how that giant battle was fought which made England a province of Normandy—a land of Saxon slaves for ever! Never shall the Saxons be lords in their land again!

When Duke William had stirred up the passions of men, his next proceeding was to establish order among them to secure his authority. With this purpose, he felt that religion must also be enlisted.

"Guislebert," said he to our old friend, the fat almoner of the earl of Flanders, who had attended the young Matilda to Normandy—William had made him archdeacon of Lisieux—"Guislebert, fat and lazy as thou art, thou must even don thy boots and haste to Pope Alexander. Thou knowest all our plans; thou knowest the extent of my power; thou knowest too, my excellent friend, the secrets of my heart, as I do those of thine, thou falsest of all traitors to thy calling and thy cloth; thou knowest how little thou valuest the Catholic faith; that thou art a heretic in thy heart, and that I have proof of thy unbelief sufficient to roast thee alive till thy blazing fat should enlighten the horizon, so that true believers in Mother Church might read the Fathers by the light of thy flaming blubber! And thou also knowest, thou shaveling, that I care not one straw for the Pope or the Church; and that if either oppose me, I would burn his holiness in effigy on Mount St. Catherine, that all Rouen might see my love for the representative of St. Peter. In fine, good priest, thou and I know each other too well to require that I should instruct thee. I am needful to the Pope, and he can assist me; moreover, if the knave does not do so, I will trample on his toe in such guise that all the gout of ten popes shall seem concentrated, nor shall all the kisses of the faithful soothe it!

Digitized by Google

"Tell his holiness that England and her king shall bow down and worship him. Peter's pence, and ten times Peter's pence, shall flow to his treasury from the pockets of the Saxons, if he will stir up men's souls to the invasion. I give him also half the plunder that shall be mine. If he resists me, by the splendour of God, I will so deal with him in England and in Normandy, as no pope was ever yet dealt with! In short, my excellent friend, with you, as with Fitzosborne, I have no difference of opinion. Go therefore, wield the Pope in our favour, and the Lord of Hosts shall bless thee in this world certainly, if not in the next, for he has told me that thou shalt be a fat Saxon bishop if William be king of England. Go thy ways, use thy accustomed art and discretion; self-interest must weigh in our favour with the Papal chair, unless Harold be before us, which cannot well be the case: if so, thy sharp wits must even work to undermine his machinations."

"Verily," answered Guislebert—"verily thou hast considerably expanded some of my accidental remarks upon the intolerant parts of our religion, made at times in the innocence of my heart and in thy presence, well knowing that when thy worldly politics would be at all thwarted thereby, thou art not greatly impeded by the niceties of Christianity, or the subtleties of polemics. But to leave this ticklish subject—is it true that thou dost meditate to send me across the Alps? D'ye take me for Hannibal, that young Carthaginian? Jesu! Maria! the white rock and the Allobroges will never be out of my mind!"

"*Padre mio*, patience and perseverance will do wonders."

"For a verity they will, if they get me out of the comfortable chambers of the convent of Chartreuse, when I get to the top of the mountain. What, leave a good bed and good dinner to roll down the other side of the Alps like a snowball, and scamper into Italy to humbug the head of our religion into a concurrence with thy ambition!"

"But the fat Saxon bishopric?" said William laughing.

"But my soul!"

"But the bishopric!" repeated William. "Why, man you have a body as well as a soul."

"By my troth, so I have!" replied the father, placing his

Digitized by Google

hands on his fat sides; "and I vow and protest I cannot discover how it will be benefited by trotting over the Grand St. Bernard. 'Fore Heaven, methinks your liege must take me for a chamois-goat!"

"Not altogether, priest, though the world does talk of you disrespectfully in some particulars."

"Scandal, scandal!—there's not a more innocent priest in the Church."

"I believe you," answered William, laughing again.

"But when am I to go to this same seven-hilled city?"

"As soon as you please."

"That'll be never, quoth'a."

"Well then, say to-morrow."

"No!" answered the priest decidedly, "not to-morrow."

"The day after?"

"My liege hurries me! Can a ponderous body like mine skip about like a flea in the fidgets?"

"Well, don't be angry good Guislebert; choose your day—but thou needs must go, Guislebert."

"Ay, verily; all must go when the devil drives." Further he dared not carry his banter; nor was he much averse to the embassy, as being no despiser of worldly advantages.

"On Monday priest," quoth William, "thy journey must commence. Do thy bidding well. Convince our holy father that prevention is better than punishment with a forward child, especially when that child is William of Normandy. Tell him that to resist the command of the Holy See would never enter my thoughts, unless that command forbade the conquest of England, which would be so greatly for the real advantage of his holiness, that his opposition would argue aberration of intellect. The Catholic religion would thus be so damaged that the faithful would be compelled, in its defence, to ascertain his competence to hold the keys of heaven."

"Very cogent arguments," quoth Guislebert as he left the chamber; "his holiness must feel their force."

"I can trust that fat priest," said William.

Here 'tis fitting to lament over the chronology of the old knight, and to be surprised how he and the elegant Robert

Digitized by Google

Wace, afterwards the famous author of the *Romance de Rux*, could have overlooked time so as to make the Chartreuse exist in 1066, when all the world knows that Bruno did not settle in the hills before 1086!

The knight thus continues:—

The duke having raised enormous sums, chiefly by loans, now collected his army, and ere his priest Guislebert returned sixty thousand men were armed, and were assembled on the banks of the little river Dive, in Normandy. For the transport of this force he had collected three thousand vessels of all sizes: nevertheless, he had established such a strict police that the peasants could bring provisions in security, and the chance traveller sing his way-song without anxiety amidst hosts of men, drawn from all parts of Europe and accustomed to rapine and violence; his discipline being enforced in a way that only a man of immense energy could effect. He embarked to pass to St. Valery; that was an error, he should have gone by land, so as to approach as near as possible to the English coast. For in this short voyage arose a storm, and the British Channel seemed to rise in wrath against those who invaded England. Ship struck against ship with dreadful crashes—the yells of men rung horribly. Amidst the darkness of the night vessels were engulfed in the depths of the sea, and struggling victims, torn and jammed among the wrecks, yet strove for life with the waves; they were but seen by the flash of the forked lightning, which cast a momentary and lurid gleam on these objects of horror, and all again was darkness.

At dawn the sight was awful; but the winds abated, and the remnants of the fleet reached St. Valery.

"Fitzosborne," said William, "this is terrible! but men's fears are increased by sad sights. Take strong parties along the coast, and rapidly bury all the bodies thou findest on the strand; let priests attend and make short service over them, not singly, but in heaps, so that we quickly hide the loss."

The Duchess Matilda arrived next day at St. Valery, bringing with her jugglers and musicians from Rouen and all places at hand, so that she soon gave a splendour to the camp, and by festivities sought to replace despair: still

Digitized by Google

much despondency was felt, for the winds seemed resolved to defend the ocean-isle, and William cast about for means to excite his troops. He ordered more liberal supplies of provisions, and at this critical moment arrived the embassy from Pope Alexander.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Guislebert telleth his tale,
Gives William a banner and nail,
Matilda christens a ship,
Taillefer maketh his quip.

"GRAMMERCY, fat priest," said William to Guislebert, as the latter entered his tent; "what news bringest thou from the Pope?"

"His holiness greets his son, the king of England, with all paternal tenderness, and sends his blessings: prayers shall be daily put up for thy success. Moreover, noble king, the successor of St. Peter sends thee a sacred banner, under which to fight for thy English rights, and those of the Church of Rome. His holiness also sends thee this ring of gold, in which is enclosed a hair from the beard of the blessed St. Peter."

Here the good archdeacon bowed lowly, and crossed himself devoutly, as did all those who followed him into the tent.

William took the ring, and placing it on his finger—"Now," said he, "by the Church of St. Peter and by this, his hair but I am the Pope's soldier till mine own locks are as grey."

"But that is not all," said the fat ambassador. "His holiness also sends you this true nail of the holy cross."

"By the splendour of God!" cried the duke, taking the nail, "I will make it into an arrowhead, and should the battle go against us, this shall turn it, if there be truth in miracles and iron."

Digitized by Google

William received the Pope's message in this jocund manner, which he often indulged in, with a view that, spreading through the camp, it should please the soldiers, who all made their jokes upon the Pope without much regard to the delicacy of the subject; indeed that rarely is over tenderly handled in a camp, and the most witty things touching the banner, the hair, and the nail were attributed to the duke.

The arrival of these sacred gifts however, gave spirits to the army; the scoffer joked, but believed; the pious were encouraged; the whole were animated, and enthusiasm again grew strong. Still the contrary winds were a subject of regret: those who were really religious felt assured that Heaven was averse to the unjust attack upon an unoffending and tranquil people, superstition daily gained upon men's fears, and the "hope deferred" for a fair wind, again affected the spirits of the troops. The relapse seemed more strong than the first attack, and it was in vain that William and Matilda used all their efforts to divert the brooding mind of the multitude.

The duchess had built a magnificent vessel for the duke. At the prow was the golden figure of a child blowing an ivory trumpet and pointing towards England. The launch was a *fête* which gave a spur to the spirits of the warriors: Matilda stood by, arrayed in all her beauty, and named the vessel *Mora*.

"There warriors!" said she, as the vessel glided off; "that little gold-and-ivory figure of Cupid points to wealth, and the fair Saxon dames who abide your arrival in England. Beauty and riches are the guerdons of the brave. Away then warriors; but ye who are married, I pray ye, forget not us poor Norman dames who sigh for your return; let us not, we beseech ye, waste our lives in tears. The Saxon women are lovely and good, like their fair lady with a swan's neck, my beautiful friend Editha—would this war had not divided us!—but be faithful Normans, and be brave; the prayers of your fond wives shall weary Heaven for your victorious return."

As Matilda said these words, her voice faltered with emotion, and tears like diamonds gathered upon her long

Digitized by Google

dark eyelashes; she passed her arm through that of the duke, and a great shout was sent forth from the armed multitude.

"Oh! thou shalt win for me large estates most excellent blade!" said Eustache, count of Boulogne, as he kissed his sword.

"Pardi! my old companion, but thou shalt do more for me than that," said Taillefer, as he cast up his lance high quivering in air, and caught it as it fell: "thou shalt win the fairest Saxon lass in London, if I get so far. Most noble duchess," continued he, falling on one knee, "grant me one grace."

"Demand it Taillefer."

"Thy glove, to wear in mine helm till Duke William redeems the pledge."

"Yea" quoth the duchess smiling, at his conceit, "but first say how is the duke to win back his own, that thou, like a false traitor, thus seekest to steal, and 'twould seem, boastest of thy treachery?"

"His liege's adventure will be a hard one, lady mine, for he must present me with a small Saxon glove to redeem it; and then a hand to fit that glove; and then a face to match the hand; and then a dowry to match the face; and then will Taillefer deliver back thy glove to his lord and thine, and still swear that the right owner of that small gauntlet has no rival in loveliness or in virtue: no! not even the Saxon 'maiden with the twisted locks.' And if thou wilt condescend to bestow thy glove, fair lady of Normandy, that Saxon will be a bold and strong man that strikes it from the helm of Taillefer."

The duchess, pleased with the address of this celebrated knight, drew her glove from her hand and presented it to the Norman, who kissed the offered favour, and placing it in his helmet, swore that "it should not part from its place except when taken by himself or when he was a corpse."

The example was soon followed by others, and ere the day closed thousands of brave youths were seen with ladies' scarfs and gloves in their casques.

"Well done Taillefer!" said William de Garenne; "by the mass man, but thou hast struck the bravest blow thou

Digitized by Google

ever didst in thy life; for thou must strike a thousand to sustain thy audacity."

"Thou sayest true, most noble Garenne," replied Taillefer; "this glove, my faith to the duke, and the heart's blood of Taillefer from henceforward are but one."

"Except the glove be ransomed," said the duke smiling.

"*Oh! pour ça, oui!* trust a Norman for knowing on which side his bread is buttered."

"The duke is as sharp as his subjects for that matter," said the count of Evreux laughing.

"For my share I only ask all I can take," cried Robert de Beaumont.

"Modest man," observed Grantmesnil.

"As modest as our master," retorted de Beaumont: "I don't suppose he means to take less; and if I help him, he may return the favour in kind."

"And what sayest thou, Sir William Mallet?" said the duchess to me, as I stood by listening to what passed among these galliards.

"Fair mistress, thy servant has few words and few wishes. All I ask is a passage in the *Mora*, for she will be the first in England, and thus I secure a place by the duke's side in battle, that he may see if the iron mace of Mallet does due honour to the Saxon axe."

"He that meets its greeting must bow so low under the curtsey, I ween, that he will scarcely rise again," said the duke.

"Ay, in truth," added Geoffrey, count of Mortain; "and if our friend Mallet gets all he can win single-handed, he would be the richest man in the company, your liege excepted."

In truth, Robert Wace, these speeches made me blush; but they were true, and they were brave knights that made them. All are now dead! gone! all lie under the green sod but William Mallet. Alas! alas! we wot not the pleasures of war till they are gone by; the days return no more. O gay and joyous Taillefer, he sleeps on the field of his glory! We reposed on the same bundle of straw with our gallant steeds the night before the battle of Hastings.

"Mallet," said he, "dost sleep?"

Digitized by Google

"Till thou heedlessly awaked me," answered I peevishly.

"Forgive me my friend," rejoined he, "but I cannot sleep; something tells me I shall be slain on the morrow."

"Very likely Taillefer; but let me sleep."

"Mallet, if I fall bury me on the spot if thou livest; and, for the love of the Virgin, promise me thou wilt do what I tell thee."

"Well, well, I promise."

"But solemnly?"

"Solemnly."

"Art sure thou sleepest not, man?"

"As sure as that I want to sleep, and thou wilt not let me."

"Well then, I have thy promise in the name of the Virgin?"

"Yes, yes; in the name of all the saints and virgins that ever told their beads!"

"Then Mallet, when I am dead, collect all the fair maidens to whom I made love in Rouen, and tell them that my death is no loss, for I'll be hanged if I meant to marry one of them. Do mind and tell them so, or they'll break their little hearts."

"Curse thy ribaldry Taillefer—let me sleep!" I said this angrily to him, and we fell asleep; but the next morning I asked him if he was serious in thinking he should be slain.

"Ay" said he, "so an old beldame who told fortunes once prophesied; but of one thing, Mallet, be assured, he who falls gloriously in battle is better off than he who lives to remember the battle and the friends gone with it. I may not fall to-day, but I will try to fall, and if fate says 'No,' why I must live to be old, toothless and twaddling, with no vigour but in my cough—Faugh! I will save this pain to some two or three good Saxons, and then I hope their comrades will repay the favour." And so we parted. Good youth, he fell, and I am here to think of all those brave and noble gentlemen!

Here the old warrior was silent for a while; some big tears rolled down his furrowed cheeks, and then he resumed his narrative.

Well, the show of the launch finished, and we all went our ways to our sports, and the day ended merrily.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLV.

William threatens a sorcerer knave;
But he knows how his life to save;
They have much talk and a little fun,
And end much better than they begun.

TOSTIG's descent in the North of England was now known. This news was what Duke William had long waited for, and his impatience to embark became great. A simultaneous attack in the north and the south had been agreed upon; he was aware of its advantages, yet up to the moment did not expect it would take place, for he wholly distrusted the co-operation of Tostig; at the same time he knew if Tostig was victorious, no great difference would be made in the game, as he would then be his rival instead of Harold: however, less dangerous because less popular, and less able as a general. But fortune still befriended William. Soon he heard that Tostig was killed, and the diversion of Harold's troops to the north was complete, if the Norman force could be transported to England in time to profit by it: but to sail with a foul wind would be madness.

The present state of feeling among the soldiers, also taught William that he must not relax his exertions to keep their spirits on the alert; and, although he had not himself any faith in sorcery, he was well aware that the black art often produced the fulfilment of its own predictions. He, therefore, resolved to court the assistance of a soothsayer, who had lately made his appearance in the neighbourhood and was greatly honoured by the soldiers; for he had been seen by them before the victory at Varaville, which he had foretold. But truly, boy Wace, I believe his sorcery was more beholden to Duke William's abilities than to the conjurer's lore; yet, no doubt, the man had sundry communications with the Evil One, and my good cousin the

Digitized by Google

Vala, affirmed him to be a man of strange cunning, and holding more knowledge of the magic art, though less gifted by nature, than herself. When she came into these parts, she always spent some time with him in a deep cavern that he ever inhabited during his visits to Normandy. It was in that cavern that the Vala saved Balder, for she often lived there also, and strange noises were ever heard from their cave when they were there; and on stormy nights the lightnings seemed to play around the spot as if it was their very source. This man William resolved to consult and secretly sent for him.

"Angelo," quoth he sternly, "I have no faith in thy vile trumperies; but there are those among us who have, and 'tis said thou hast thyself credence in thy art—is it so?"

"Yes, even so," answered the sorcerer with an offended air of haughtiness.

Duke William fixed his fierce eyes upon the man's face, and then, standing with his legs stretched wide asunder and his elbows akimbo, thus addressed the conjurer:—

"Sir Saucy, mark my words, and answer me! if thou hast the power of divination, what hold hast thou of thy own life?"

"Your pleasure."

"And how long do you think I will let you live?"

"I shall not die by your order. The fates forbid it."

"You are bold fellow."

"No. I know by my art that thou meanest at this moment to kill me, and thou art devising in thine own mind by what tortures I shall die; but ere they be inflicted, thy reason will assume sway and save me. Duke William gratifies his passions, but not at the expense of his policy: thou art fierce, lustful, vindictive, and cruel; but thy ruling passion is ambition, and the greatness of thy master-spirit tramples down all minor propensities. Therefore I say again, the fates tell me I shall not die by thy order, and I defy thee: thine own ambition protects!"

"How?" demanded the duke, surprised at the bold speech of the astrologer, his furious looks softening into an expression of inquiry.

"Sire, sire, I am an old man and have learned to read

Digitized by Google

men's characters as well as the occult sciences. Great men like you are exposed, even as the stars themselves, to the ken of the public, and they that run may read. Thou knowest at this moment that I am but a tool in thine hands to forward thy great plans, and, humble as I am, the moment has made me valuable to thy designs, else thou hadst not sent for Angelo to meet thee in secret: thou requirest that I should prophesy success to the projected invasion. I long since knew this, and consulted the stars upon thy fate, that I might answer those who consulted me."

"And have any consulted thee?" asked William eagerly.

"Ay sire—not less than twenty thousand of thy best and greatest followers, within the last two months."

"Who be they, among these fools, that flock to hear thy nonsense?"

"I am in thine hands great duke of Normandy, and if thou so commandest I will tell thee; but betray not thy servant."

"Thy secrets are safe—speak!"

"Duke William, all thy court have consulted me; with the exception of the Lady Matilda, there is not one of note about thee who has not sought to learn their fate from me—not one. 'Twas but a week since, that thy brother, the bishop of Bayeux, came to my cell disguised like an old beggar. He first offered me a small copper coin to learn his fate; I knew him and refused. He increased his offers; still I refused, until he came to a large sum. 'I cannot,' said I, 'without permission of my magic-master. Let me retire and cast a spell to learn if I may prophesy.' 'Yea, verily,' replied thy good and holy brother"—here the sorcerer gave a look of irony at the duke which his interrogator could not resist, and burst into a laugh.

"Thou old caitiff, I forgive thee all thy insolence for playing this trick upon Bishop Odo. Go on with thy story."

"'Yea,' said thy brother, 'and be quick, for time presses.' I retired for a few moments, and then returned. 'The spirits answer me,' said I, 'that they have no force against aught that is sacred, and cannot open the doors of futurity against the divine seal placed thereon: Until the bishop of Bayeux places his sacred ring on thy finger, the spirits of

Digitized by Google

darkness have no power to speak. If then thy power and riches are such that thou canst place the ring of that right reverend father in God on my finger—which certes thou canst not do—then, Sir Unknown, my power to tell thy fortunes and expound thy fate will avail: not before, for thou art assuredly one over whom the spirits of darkness have no power. And how shall I, a poor seer of the cavern, speak to a bishop, and tell him to place his ring on my finger that I may prophesy to a stranger in guise of a mendicant? Sir, it grieves me to give thee offence; and thy rich gifts would serve me much, 'tis vexatious to reject them; but get ye hence, I cannot serve thee.'

"While I spoke thy excellent brother stood as it were doubtful: 'Should I procure the ring of the bishop and place it on thy finger, wilt thou forthwith return it?'

"'No! 'twould be to trifle with the science of jonglerie, and the apparitions would rebel! If the sacred ring be placed upon the finger of Angelo, it there must remain for ever. 'Twill be a divine sanction to my dark incantations, and give more power to my spells: 'tis a victory of the spirit of darkness over the faith! But without this, thy fortunes thou canst not learn. I repeat that they are big with imminent adventure, full fraught with perils and strange marvels; but the spirits fear thee, be thou who thou mayest.' At these words thy brother said,—

"'Angelo, thy hand. There! be the ring of Odo thine for ever! But if thou showest it to mortal man, by the powers of the Church I will make thee die the death of a heretic.' There duke is the ring; for to deceive thee were worse than to deceive thy brother, who continued, 'I am Odo, speak my fate.' I cast spells and consulted my books, and I told him what the stars said: that his fate is bound up with that of Duke William and the army of England. Various small points relative to women also did I tell him; but did not disturb the stars to unfold to the querist, nor call up spirits from the depths of the ocean to expound, these fair dames having themselves consulted with me upon the same points, and therefore, by casting nativities and imagining certain combinations, I arrived at the natural results. My

Digitized by Google

divinations will, I have no doubt, be fulfilled, for I warned the dames that a handsome young bishop was more dangerous than a handsome young knight."

"And what said they?"

"Sire, they said the bishop was certainly very fervent; but that truth was always so. 'Madam,' replied I always, for they ever consulted me singly, 'the fates are clear; but fervour is an effect and not a cause. The cause of the bishop's fervour must be either your beauty or his religion. Let us consult my magic glass.' I darkened one of the inner caves and various symbols passed in shadows upon the bright walls, and there came a shade of mother Eve; the bishop's head appeared on the body of the serpent, and the apple hung hard by. 'The serpent seems very fervid,' remarked I, 'will ye that I exhibit more? Will ye have more scenes of the bishop's fervour, for my spells can give those of the past, the present, and the future!' But the fair querists would not inquire more."

"Well," said the duke laughing, "now for business: wilt thou aid me with thy jonglerie? My people have credence in thy powers, will ye prophesy success to my enterprise?"

"Great duke I am serious, I will tell thee what the stars forewarn, be it good or evil. I often play with the follies of men, and still oftener with those of women, and they pay me largely for their credulity; but when matters are of great import, I consult the appearances of nature, and in them I read prophetic lessons. I can tell the prognostics of the fruitful elements, and cast spells so deep and powerful that spirits shall rise and speak upon the summons; and certes the study of astrology doth give notice of men's fate—but time is needed. Propose thy queries, and in three days Angelo shall respond truly."

"In three days I hope to be in England, Angelo!"

"No, thou quittest not these shores for five days, it may be more."

"Curses upon thy prophecies caitiff! I tell thee ere three days shall pass I will be in England!"

"I tell thee no, great duke! and if thou temptest fate and puttest to sea, thy destruction is inevitable. I have the

Digitized by Google

means of telling the weather: even as I speak a storm arises and the wind is foul. Go not great sire; my wishes are with thee, but I will not be a false prophet to assist thy projects, not even to save my life—I dare not."

"Then go thy ways, and we will consult thee three days hence, if we be here: at what hour?"

"About the hour of midnight," answered Angelo and departed.

"By heavens," said the duke, turning to me (for he had concealed me to hear the conversation), "that is a strange being! these jonglers are reflecting men. I do not altogether give credit to their magic; yet 'tis passing strange. The tales they tell of this man and the Saxon Vala are wonderful; they see deep into futurity; I think they must have some means of learning that which to ordinary mortals is concealed. But Mallet," continued he, after a pause, "I will tell thee a fact; thou mayest repeat it, but say not that I told thee: a spirit appeared to me ere yester-e'en, pointed to England and vanished. Was this fate, or what is it?"

When he said this, boy, my blood seemed to thicken in my veins. I knew well how idly he treated the stories of such apparitions, which light speeches often offended me; for I believe, Robert Wace, that spirits of the other world often resort to this world, and we know that these seers and weird sisters can foretell events: therefore, when he avowed that he had seen a spirit, I trembled with awe. "Sire," said I, "the awful spirit would not have pointed towards England but for good; but why didst thou not ask that gifted man to expound the apparition?"

"Because Mallet I will that the fact be known; but that I do not speak of it as a matter which I regard. Let it be known as a secret intrusted to thee, and as such intrust it to another. So let the spell work, if it be from heaven; for he unto whom thou tellest this matter will repeat it to a friend, and ere twelve hours pass the whole army will be aware of this strange matter, which, though I said it not to Angelo, was my secret motive for consulting him."

I did as he desired, and the word went that in consequence of this vision he was to consult the seer.

To Angelo however he sent Taillefer, with an express

Digitized by Google

order, saying, that if the stars were unpropitious, the necromancer's public answers must be so dark and doubtful as to give no fears to the troops; for if he promulgated evil, the first word would be his death from Taillefer, who in disguise was to attend. Now Taillefer had himself been a minstrel in his youth, and in Egypt had learned all the arts of jonglerie. Carried away by Moorish pirates, and sold into slavery as a boy, he escaped by his great strength and courage, and entered the Varangian guards at Constantinople, then commanded by Harold Hardrada, now king of Norway, and the friend of Tostig. To Taillefer then, the duke trusted the task of slaying Angelo, should he speak disastrously; and on the deed being perpetrated he was to continue a mock incantation.

I knew not all these things at the time, nor that the chief told me the story of having seen a spirit (which was not true), in order to raise the expectations of his warriors; in sooth it was not justifiable, but he deceived us all; and at Hastings we held much faith in the prophecies we had heard, and they were true — all happened as the seer foretold.

When Angelo returned to his cave, he found Taillefer there before him, and in conversation with a grey-headed old man, whose long beard was white as driven snow.

"Angelo," whispered the gay knight, "I come from Duke William, to give thee some instructions which this old white-beard must not hear."

"Who is he?" asked Angelo.

"I know him not," said Taillefer; "but he says he sought your cave, to learn the fate of his son, who is a soldier in the army of the duke."

"Come into the inner cave good Sir Taillefer," replied the seer, "and I will converse with thee in secret. Old man," continued he, turning to the octogenarian, "sit thee awhile upon this rock, and I will shortly return."

The old man answered not, but seated himself; and the astrologer. entering the inner cave with the knight, closed the rude door after them, and placed a stone against it.

Taillefer repeated the message of the duke.

"Now" said he, "I am sorry to be charged with this

Digitized by Google

message if it distresses thee Angelo; for well I know that thy conduct, and that of all who pursue the profession of the magi, is ruled by circumstances which it is not easy to control. But, by the rod of Zoroaster, thou must do the bidding of Duke William, for he is a greater magician than thou, or the Vala either; and that other necromancer, Harold, with that damnable wand of his, which has pleased to take the shape of a huge battle-axe, is alone a match for him. We shall soon see their stars, now octile with the zenith, mount gloriously for the ascendant, and deadly will be their grand occursion. Oh! 'twill be a glorious meeting! But hold—I lose myself good Angelo, in thinking of the coming fight between these great magicians! To business then, my good friend! Thou must not prognosticate of evil to our arms; for if thou dost Angelo, by all the gods—by Odin and Osiris! by the whole pantheon, Christian and pagan, this good blade goes through thy heart. If thou canst speak good speak; give full utterance to thy predictions: but if thy augury be of evil, be silent and leave me to prophesy!"

"Good knight, the alternative is severe; but the occasion is an obvention which will not be of frequent occurrence. Tell me now sir knight, if I raise spirits and ken not what their responses may be, wilt take upon thee to rule them?"

"Yea by the rood, sir necromancer, I will! I will rule the devil himself, if William of Normandy saith—'Taillefer, take that spirit by the horns!'" As he uttered these words, a strong smell of sulphur filled the cave, and a strange voice repeated the last word of the knight, "*Horns!*"

"Was that an echo in thy cavern Angelo?" said Taillefer; "and this smell of sulphur—faugh, I suffocate." "*Suffocate,*" repeated the voice.

"There is no echo in my cave, sir knight."

"Nay then, it is the devil himself." "*Himself,*" said the voice.

"Good devil thy brimstone is too strong, and I leave thee; but thy horns have no terrors for Taillefer, he is unmarried—yet I choke; damn thy devil, good Angelo, open the door;" and issuing from the inner cave, they found

Digitized by Google

the poor old silver-beard stretched senseless on the ground. He however soon recovered, and said that he had been overthrown by a sudden gust of sulphurous wind, and fell senseless as they found him. Taillefer gave him a small piece of silver and departed.

"By the sword of Odin, Vala, but thou playedst well thy part. Oh, thou art beyond us all! none can match thee!"

"Yet it only cost me a couple of matches Angelo," said the old man starting up; "I am come to do more than this, my good uncle. We are both friends to our Saxon race; I am come from Harold to learn the numbers of the Normans and their time of sailing, and all other necessary intelligence. The Saxon king was averse to my coming, but what is danger to Frica when the Saxons are in peril? I have heard all that passed between you and Taillefer; the devil himself can hardly deal with this Norman duke. No wonder—does not the blood of Rollo flow in his veins? Oh, the heart of Frica breaks to see these bold Normans set in battle array against the Saxons; but the ancient saying of the Scald is true:—'If a Scandinavian is to be roasted alive you will ever find a countryman ready to turn the spit.' Frica's blood is indeed a mixture of Saxon and Scandinavian; her heart warms to them all: but English air she first breathed; English food nourished her; the soil of England she has trod with infant feet; the woods, the waters, and the hills of England she has looked on with delight; and dearest to her heart of all, the hero she loved fell like a Saxon, battle-axe in hand, resisting Norman insolence! Yes brave Ethelwolf, thy dust is mixed with the soil of England, and base is the blood which deserts the land where all it cherished moulders! Yes Angelo, I and all I love are English, and for England I will die! I fear not that galliard Taillefer, and would prophesy at the risk of death against his master, but it would serve no end, it would turn to the advantage of the Normans; they would expose my dead body, and say, 'Behold the Vala! the spy of Harold!' and none would believe my predictions—alas! alas! they would be false, also, for I have searched the fates and ransacked hell itself to find out aught to serve the

Digitized by Google

Saxons—in vain! One fearful doom has fallen upon the Saxon race, and not even the great and glorious Harold can contend with fate.

"The Norman destiny is to soar, and riot in the ascendant; the Normans shall fall upon the land like the plagues of Egypt, and shall consume the Saxon race. The spirit of Cain shall guide the invaders, and rapine and murder rule the island, till the blood of the Godwins shall again fill the English throne: then the Norman savages shall lose their blood-stained power, and be melted into the mass of the Saxon people. The conquest and the conquerors shall pass into a fruitless dream of history. But to work brave Angelo! We must not tell these Normans that victory awaits them; nor dare we beard the fates by false expositions. We must be true, but so dark and so doubtful, that we shall but little raise the hopes of the desponding. Courage Angelo! thy time is short, I have cast thy destiny; we meet no more except in Midgaard. Thou wilt accompany this great armament against the Saxons, but we meet no more! What, dost start man at that sound—fearest thou to die? Didst think thyself immortal, old dotard? By the powers of Muspelheim, but I have half the will to slay thee on the spot!"

"Nay Vala, keep thy temper; Angelo trembles not at death—'twas merely a start of surprise. I did not think the hour was so nigh, but I heed it not, men start even at the news of pleasure."

"Oh, thou art a true uncle of the Vala. Our candles have burned out; let not the snuff stink with dishonour, but give one bright sparkle and be dark. Our first object must be to find out the numbers of the army, that of their ships, and the time of sailing, I will then cast doubts upon their minds and depart, unless William discover me, and then we shall die. But neither my art nor thine can tell whether he is to be our murderer or some other. All I can learn is, that within this month we shall both die a violent death. Prepare thine incantations while I go into the camp as a blind woman with a fiddle, and look for my son, the only one left of all your nephews," said the Vala; and she uttered the most melancholy whine.

Digitized by Google

"Come," continued she, "let us to the secret caves, and lose no time."

Saying this they entered the inner cavern, and fastening the door, removed a small heap of wood and dry material for firing, beneath which was a flat stone. The side of the cave above this stone appeared to be a rude projecting rock, but the seer with ease rolled it out—secret wheels passing over the flat stone. The Vala entered upon her hands and knees, followed by Angelo; they closed the movable rock after them, and then the necromancer, opening a small door concealed in a deep hole beneath a projection of the opposite side of the cave, with a pole pushed the faggots back upon the flat stone, and thus concealed it again. Not that its being seen could further any discovery of the artful opening of the secret caverns, for the moving rock seemed fixed as the cave itself, and was fastened with a vast beam within.

When the necromancers entered, they lighted up the caves, which were extensive and contained all their magic tools, their provisions, and various riches in money and precious stones; in short, all that their art required, besides most of the luxuries of the day, for Angelo had in his youth been a voluptuary, and these deep caverns evinced proofs not only of his taste but of his learning. There is reason to believe that if the secrets of these recesses were told, they would redound more to the generosity and conviviality of the necromancer than to his morals or gravity. Once it so happened, that a pleasure-party upon the sea were overtaken by a storm and driven ashore near this cave; unknowing where they were, they entered, struck a light, and found it to be the cave of Angelo. They were much alarmed; but the sorcerer was away, and, fearful of the storm, they remained, still expecting his return. He came not, and soon they heard sounds of sweetest music and laughing, as if a merry party was in the earth. At last all was hushed; the party remained till the dawn, and then departed, sorely troubled with fears. One of them, more courageous than the rest, soon afterwards met the sorcerer.

"Angelo, I fear me we had no right to enter thy cavern as we did," and he narrated all that had passed.

Digitized by Google

"Ah!" said the seer significantly, "was it even so? I was away that night, and the spirits of the storm revelled; they seldom make merry in the ken of human ears, and 'tis well they heard ye not, for they are malicious, and, knowing I was not with you, might have made sport of ye to your great disparagement, for the sport of demons is the evil of men. Had ye a priest, or a missal with ye?"

"No, we were a party embarked for our amusement."

"Oh, ye were fortunate; had ye had a priest, a missal, or a cross, or a breviary among ye, the wild spirit of the storm would have felt its influence and been aware that ye were near; thus your imprudence for once saved ye from great harm. Never again amuse yourselves without the advice or the presence of a priest, or a relic, or some holy thing. The want of this indeed threw ye into danger; but accident and the fear of my cave, which these spirits never enter willingly, saved ye."

After this, all feared to approach the cave, and it is dreaded even to this day. The priests too, greatly courted Angelo, who was, they said, a pious man and a good Christian that only dealt in the magic art for the good of mankind, and for the honour of the true faith.

Into these caverns then they entered, and made their arrangements. The Vala dressed herself in her new disguise as an old blind woman, and taking her fiddle departed, leaving Angelo to prepare his incantations. It is now time to say what Harold was about in England, upon which the torch of war had fallen, blazing with fearful energy.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLVI.

Harold wishes to save his brother,
But Tostig dies, which saves much bother,
Hadrada is slain, and though seven feet high,
Harold gives him room to lie.
A fellow as big knocks the Saxons about,
Till Harold gives him an ugly clout.

WHEN Harold had despatched his chief eoldermen to their various posts he sent for Frica.

"Vala, how can I best serve thee, to repay thy faith and truth to Editha and myself?"

"Cyning, I am repaid all service rendered to thee and the queen. When I arrived here I was instantly shown into her apartments; there were there many dames of high degree, they all feared me in their hearts, but their haughty manners told me they disdained Frica, though they dreaded the Vala: in a few moments the red wrath would have gathered in my Scandinavian heart, for vengeance was in view. I saw them all in chains, in slavery, and dishonoured. Anger would have made me tell them their sad destinies, but the swan-necked maiden of the Saxon tresses, the queen herself, no sooner saw Frica enter than she rose, radiant as light, and with the beauty of gladness threw her arms round the neck of her servant. Never before knew I how much she loved me, for in all our dangers and in all our troubles she made me feel that she trusted her God, and held my art and all magic cheap. I was her servant and her tool till this hour arrived, when in the midst of all her glory, all her happiness, and all her state, she made me feel that Frica was her dearest friend. She spoke truly when, turning to the ladies of her court, she took my hand and said, 'Saxon dames! she whom your husbands have made queen of the Saxons, and whom you have joined to honour, she whose greatest pride is to be the wife of Harold, and next, to deserve your respect, presents to you

Digitized by Google

the Vala Frica; not as one unknown to any here present, but as one to whom, under God, Editha owes life, honour, freedom! As ye honour me honour the Vala, for next to Harold is this wise and courageous woman dear to the heart of your queen.' Saying these words she led me to a seat beside her: behind were Rose and Winifred, and on each side of these damsels stood Elstan and Canute, resting on their battle-axes. 'Oh,' said the queen laughing, 'by my troth Ulric, but the whole minstrel party are once more assembled as we erst were in the court of William, the Norman duke. The times are changed, and shall we be sad in the court of Harold the king? The minstrels have changed their dresses, and they shall sing to you ladies more merrily than they did to Matilda. Poor Matilda! how much I am beholden to her, how grateful I feel for all her goodness to me. Alas! alas! how her ambitious husband gives pain to us all: but courage is the great feature of our Saxon women as well as of our men, and we must rouse them to all the fury of the combat. I love even the miserable ballads hawked in the streets, for it is the repetition of the sentiment that makes the mass of men feel, rather than the manner of the words. Come minstrels let us chant the new ballad.' Saying this she sung with all the taste and harmony of her powerful voice—

1.

While Harold rules the land,
The gallant and the great;
His Saxons in a band,
Will bide the battle's fate.

2.

Oh! strongly strikes the Saxon,
When fighting hand to hand;
And hand to hand the Saxon
Will fight for this dear land.

3.

The Dane has felt his force,
The Norman shall go down,
And lie a bloody corse,
Not wear the Saxon crown.

Digitized by Google

The quondam minstrels joined their voices to hers, and when they ended I left her, and come before thee great cyning of the Saxons to ask, what can the Vala do to serve thy people? As to me, cyning, thou art naught in my debt. Thy friendship and that of Editha is enough. Riches I can command, and even, if need be, contribute to thy treasures, for the war needs gold as well as iron."

"Excellent Vala! I want neither men nor gold, nor iron, at this moment, beyond that which I can command. What I want is intelligence from the camp of Duke William, and methinks thou canst aid me in procuring that by means of thy emissaries."

"Truly, even so Harold; but I will myself go into the camp of the enemy, and like the great Alfred search his strength."

"Even so would I do," observed the king, "but the uncertain winds prevent me. I expect Tostig to land, and Harold must be at his post; yet I will not that thou goest in person Frica, for thy life would be the forfeit should the relentless duke discover thee in such work."

"Fear not! Frica dare lose her life for the Saxons. Thy life and mine, great chief, are limited. I know thee to be fearless, and therefore tell thee our end fast approaches: but I shall not die in Normandy. When and where Harold falls, then and there the Vala dies."

Harold held out his hand to the prophetess. "Why, Frica, death must come, and never more welcome than in battle: we shall beat these Normans."

"No! The doom of the Saxon is sealed, but glory will live to all time. I speak to thee, O cyning, as the friend of the Vala, as one whom fate cannot shake—a soul of glory and of steel: but to all others I am dark, and mysterious, and prognosticate, as far as the Vala dare, a happy issue to our times."

"Frica be true; the object of Harold is to die in defence of the Saxon people. Away then, and prophesy that Harold will be victorious, for you will speak the truth."

The Vala smiled. "Odin prosper thee, thou greatest warrior of our race! Thy saga will be full of glory. Adieu

Digitized by Google

till I return from the Norman camp." So saying the Vala departed.

"There goes as true a Saxon heart as ever beat in a Saxon bosom!" exclaimed he. "I am not fearful of her forebodings, for she will not tell them to others. To me death in battle is welcome: I fear nothing but an imbecile old age, and misery for England if the Norman beats us—but the Saxons are brave."

While thus ruminating on future events a messenger arrived from the North, to inform him that Tostig had landed and was ravaging the country in union with Harold Hardrada, king of Norway—that earls Morcar and Edwin had vainly endeavoured to stem the course of the invaders.

Harold had long made his preparations, and that day, after taking leave of Editha, departed for the North with his guards, having previously despatched messengers to all the northern chiefs to meet him on his march. He charged Editha with the government, aided by Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury, and gave orders that they should assemble the fleet with all possible expedition; for he had dismissed his sailors, thinking that William and Tostig would now delay their invasion till the spring. A desire to lessen the cost of the war and lighten the taxes induced him to take that step; nor, indeed, could he be justly accused of imprudence, for a fleet, however powerful, cannot prevent an invasion except under a concurrence of fortuitous circumstances that seldom takes place. A fleet is a weapon of *offence*, not of *defence;* it may indeed defend the commerce of a country, but it cannot protect from invasion the country itself. A country can only be defended by the warlike dispositions of its inhabitants, and institutions which produce such dispositions. The Saxons were brave, Robert Wace, but they fell beneath the more experienced swords of Duke William and his barons; the peaceful reign of Edward was ill calculated to form generals who could cope with William. When Harold and Gurth fell the Norman duke had no rival. However, though Harold did not greatly value his fleet, still he was not a man to leave any means of defence unemployed and out of action.

On reaching the army of the North he found it cast down

Digitized by Google

by defeat; but his presence soon changed the moral weakness of the troops into energy, and a desire to try the temper of their swords once more against the cruel invaders. The country was in terror, strewed with murdered Saxons, and at night the horizon was illuminated with the flames of burning hamlets and towns. Harold groaned with rage and the desire of vengeance, he saw that no time was to be lost, the work of destruction could not be carried on more fiercely after a defeat, and he resolved to engage his brother without delay.

On hearing of the arrival of their king, the miserable fugitives from rapine and murder collected round the camp; the air resounded with their wailings, infants wept for parents whose bodies lay scattered over the face of the devastated land. The shrieks of women who had lost all that was dear pierced the heart with pity, and fierce peasants, crying aloud for arms and vengeance, joined their deep voices to a clamour which made the welkin ring, coming down from the multitudes which covered the hills in rear of the Saxon camp.

Harold drew forth his troops: he told them to look at the crowds of miserable people which surrounded three sides of the camp, and were still crowding on.

"Saxons," cried he in a loud voice, "is that a sight for valour to bear?"

The troops shouted forth, "Lead us to battle!"

"Yet a moment, patience," said the chief, "I will lead you to battle; but first tell me why have all those suffering men, as strong and as numerous as the soldiers I now address, why have they fled without resisting? If they and the thousands who have been massacred by the enemy had merely fought with stones they would have not so suffered, nor would so many have been slain. Many you see are well armed; and scythes, and forks, and stakes of wood, whose points are hardened in fire, are good arms in the hands of brave men."

"They are cowards!" cried the soldiers.

"No!" said the king, "they are not cowards; but they are not disciplined to obey one chief; and unless ye are obedient to me and to your chiefs it will be idle for

Digitized by Google

me to lead *you* against the enemy. You must promise to obey Harold, ere he can lead you to victory."

"We promise!" resounded through the ranks of the army.

"Then behold your enemy!" said he, turning towards the north and pointing to the foe, who had just passed over Stamford bridge. Their whole army was in sight. Harold ordered all the Saxon women and children to separate from the men, and form in one body behind the army; all the men he ordered to form on the left of his troops, giving them arms.

"Now Saxons, will ye that I give these women and children over to the invaders, on condition that they spare our lives; or will ye teach them that we are men who have courage to defend wives and children, and avenge our country?"

"To battle! to battle! vengeance!"

"Then 'Harold the king and vengeance!' be the word of battle," said the chief; and he ordered the army to advance. The invaders awaited their approach. Both Tostig and Harold Hardrada were brave, and the Norwegian king, of gigantic stature, was also a leader of great experience, having long served in the wars of the Greek emperor Comnenus. He drew his soldiers up in a circle, man to man and shield to shield, with long protruding spears, for he greatly feared the cavalry of King Harold.

The Saxon king, at all times averse to the spilling of English blood, called aloud to his brother Tostig, and made him large offers of land and pardon if he and his followers would make peace.

"And what," answered Tostig, "what, O Harold, wilt thou bestow upon the king of Norway?"

"Seven feet of earth for a grave, or a little more, as he is among the tallest of men."

"Then let the god of battles decide, for it shall not be said that Tostig deserted his friend." It was a brave reply!

The Norwegian king was riding round the circle, into which form he had cast his army, and in the midst waved the fearful landcydar, or "waster of lands," the Norwegian standard. He was seven feet in height, and across his broad shoulders was cast his blue mantle, called "Emma," the

Digitized by Google

enchanted gift of a Grecian dame at Constantinople. He rode a large black charger, whose eyes and nostrils seemed to emit fire, so full was he of spirit and so little did he seem to heed the weight of the mighty warrior who bestrode him. But fate was upon the rider! the horse fell and the king was thrown headlong from his saddle; his bright helmet was sullied with dust, and a moan of horror was heard among the Norwegian warriors at the sad omen of defeat.

The Saxon army gave a loud shout of derision.

"Who is the fallen cavalier?" demanded the king of the Saxons.

"Harold Sigurdson Hardrada, the king," replied many voices.

"By the hammer of Thor! fortune has dethroned him," exclaimed Harold.

When Tostig refused to treat, Harold gave orders for his cavalry to charge. Firm stood the Norwegians: the butt-ends of the spears in their front ranks were stuck into the ground, the bearers being on one knee with their shields close. The second, third, fourth, and fifth ranks had their lances also advanced, and the Saxon chivalry could make no impression; nothing but shields and spears were visible, and the repulse was complete in every part of the battle. Seeing this, Harold again ordered his warriors to charge, but with directions to feign a panic and fly. The stratagem succeeded; the Norwegians broke the magic circle and pursued, upon which Harold charged the pursuers in flank with his horsemen, and his infantry burst into the openings. Then was the battle awful; for the Norwegians, to be light and active for pillage, had left their coats of mail in their ships, landing in their helmets and leather jerkins, and had no chance but in the desperate fury of their fighting. They closed like demons with the Saxons. Then fell Harold Hardrada pierced through the throat with an arrow. The cruel, but brave Tostig, sold his life dearly; for a while he rallied the defeated Norwegians, some succour came from the ships, and King Harold, anxious to save his brother, again offered him terms: the furious Tostig rejected the proffered pardon, the battle raged amain, he fell, and the Norwegians retreated over the bridge of Stamford.

Digitized by Google

But the whole Saxon army now received a momentary check from one man. A gigantic Norwegian stood at the pass like a colossus, dealing death to all who approached him; the Saxons were checked, no man was willing to come within the sweep of that huge weapon high glancing in the air and threatening destruction. This momentary check produced a pressure, and some brave Saxons rushed against the terrible foe; but his glaive fell with the swiftness of the lightning's flash, cutting through helm and chain-mail with resistless force. The flash of the weapon, the sparks which flew from the stricken helmet, the groan of death, seemed simultaneous; and ere the warm blood could curdle on the blade, another and another victim fell beneath the still descending edge, till blunted, it would no longer cut, but crushed all that opposed its dreadful force. The arm of the tremendous hero seemed to defy fatigue; his thick broad shield bristled with arrows, and these from time to time he dashed away with a furious shake, and held it aloft for more.

There were many brave men behind him, but he bid them back.

"Stand away, and give me room for battle. Room I say! Come on ye Saxon dogs, come on! Fear ye the arm of a single Norwegian?"

Stung by his taunts, many a brave and strong fighter rushed forward to die on the mound of corpses raised to glory by a single arm. But now Harold came up from another part of the field.

"Why stand you here Saxons? On, on! force the bridge!"

"There is no passage," cried many voices; "a Norwegian guards the bridge, and already forty of our bravest champions are slain; before his mighty arm nor shield nor armour avails."

"Ha, is it so! open your ranks, and let your king advance."

The troops made a vista, at the end of which stood the Norseman, like Thor himself descending to combat.

The intrepid monarch spurred his fiery horse, which sprung like a tiger towards the huge Norwegian; for the well-taught beast knew what was expected from him. Harold

Digitized by Google

beheld the towering form of his terrible antagonist, whose force he measured with a glance; but his eye was steady as his heart. An eye as firm confronted him, and saw that he was the king. The Norwegian's heart swelled exultant, he raised his weapon to fell the horse first, and thus his eye for a moment quitted the rider for the steed—that moment was his last. Harold's curtle-axe, hurled with unerring force, was buried in his brain. Staggering the giant fell, and wildly the shouting Saxons rushed over the gaunt carcass of the glorious soldier. His name was never known.

The carnage was immense; the fugitives rushed to the shore, but the victor arrived at the same time, and the fleet was captured. Harold, however, always generous, restored twenty ships to the youthful Olaf, son of Harold Hardrada, and sent him back to Norway. The booty was immense; but expecting the invasion of Duke William, and averse to tax his subjects, Harold refused to divide the treasures found in the Norwegian camp among his soldiers; an act which spoke more in favour of the king's sense of justice than of his desire to court popularity. But the many, who attribute the loss of the battle of Hastings to this cause, are surely mistaken; for though it is said that Harold discontented his soldiers, by refusing to them the booty, there is no proof that the Saxon king wanted either numbers, or the affection of his brave army, fighting at Hastings. That battle was, as I, a Norman, must confess, lost by the over-ardour of the Saxons, which made them disobey the orders of their great chief, whose death alone gave us the victory. Had he lived, no man can tell how the battle would have ended; and Harold was not the man to resign his crown because he lost a single battle. No Saxon took part with a foreign enemy against their sovereign; their country was dear to them all. They had chosen a hero for their monarch, and all united to maintain the honour of England.

Robert Wace, no traitor welcomed the stranger red with the blood of Saxons. Harold's troops fought like men, till the abilities of the Norman duke and the superiority of the Norman army overpowered them; but had Harold lived, he

Digitized by Google

would have fought again and again, the Saxons rallying round him, till we Normans would have sunk under our very victories. It is glorious to see a nation true to itself, and to a hero; but filled with traitors, the very genius of war personified cannot save it; his utmost efforts could only protract a sanguinary struggle, and deluge his country with her children's blood! Then it is that the hero shines forth more great and glorious than ever: scorning to war for himself, he resigns his own safety into the hands of ungenerous enemies, and in hopeless captivity mourns for an ungrateful people! But the Saxons, boy, were ever faithful to a hero. Honour be to that nation which glories in its victorious general, and woe be to those who glory not in his laurels! Boy! boy! these things make an old man grieve to think upon! Those brave Saxons deserved a better fate. William, though stern and somewhat harsh, was a great king and respected by them; but the tyranny of the Norman nobles they could not bear. Often they revolted—but, betrayed and disarmed, what could they do? The nation bleeds at every pore, and will soon be crushed by their Norman rulers—insatiable and bloody. I left it, Robert Wace; I did not like to behold the shame of my countrymen lording it unjustly.

You sold all your possessions sir, did you not?

Yea verily good Robert, and with large gains; for Duke William rewarded my poor services with great guerdon. Three estates were my recompense, with their lords for my slaves: to these and their families I gave their freedom, and great share of what I received; not all, for I won them honourably with my sword, and had I given them all some other Norman would have seized upon the gift. If all had done as William Mallet did, the Saxons would now be a happy people. But let us return to the camp of Duke William, leaving Harold at York re-establishing order in that ruined city.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLVII.

To a letter, signed Conan,
Duke William says Anan!
A cup of poison
Is drunk in season.
A parchment of writing bare
Makes a greedy earl stare.

It will be recollected that when Tostig came and informed Duke William that Edward was dead, his reception was cold. William placed no confidence in him; nor was his descent on England a preconcerted measure, originating with the Norman duke; it was, in fact, produced by the failure of an able plan, laid by Harold himself. For when the astute son of Godwin found himself threatened by the Normans, he sent an agent to Conan, count of Bretagne, reminding him that William had poisoned his father Alain; and that if the duke of Normandy invaded England and should conquer it, he would dispossess Conan of his territory, and annex Bretagne to his own duchy.

Conan at once fell into the views of Harold; and when Duke William summoned him to join in the invasion of England, he received the following answer:—

"I am glad to hear that you are about to invade England; I rejoice in the glory that awaits you. But begin by an act of justice! You poisoned my father, Alain, at Vimoutiers. I was an infant, and you robbed me of my inheritance. Restore to me the duchy of Normandy, to which you have no right; if you do not, I declare war against you.

"Conan."

This demand was followed up by deeds of arms; and the count of Bretagne besieged Château Gontier. Hostilities of so serious a nature were of too much importance to be neglected. The force of William's treasury was strained to the utmost in the preparations for his descent on England; and the delays which had already taken place cost im-

Digitized by Google

mense sums of money. He could with an army of sixty thousand men have crushed the count of Bretagne: but would that army march against Conan? The chiefs who composed it had assembled to conquer England, where glory and gain awaited their victorious lances. An obscure war against the Bretons, with whom many among them were closely connected, and all at peace, was altogether another affair—and for what? for the private interests of the duke of Normandy! What was it to them whether Conan or William ruled the duchy of Normandy? They wanted to be led against England, by a renowned warrior, who was to pay their services out of what he should gain, not out of what he possessed. Each chieftain who led his bands to this great marauding expedition expected to win a territory equal to that of Normandy, and more fertile than that of Bretagne, for his own share of plunder! Then the money-lenders! how were they to be paid by the conquest of Bretagne?—all his treasure would be quickly exhausted by a war with Conan. The Norman duke was sensible of the working of Harold's great genius. Nor was this all. Gautier, count of Meulan, revived claims to the province of Maine.

Pressed on all sides by these difficulties, which indeed surround all great enterprises, and without which they could be executed by every bold schoolboy; William, with the decision of a great mind and the unscrupulousness of a bad one, poisoned Conan out of hand. Then the Bretons returned to obedience, and the count of Meulan, profiting by the lesson, allowed his claims upon Maine to rest in peace. And in sooth, good Robert Wace, he showed his discretion; for the Conqueror was a great, and no doubt a good man, who sought to save the effusion of human blood, on which account he was much given to study venoms—God rest his soul!

When the chamberlain who had administered the poison to Conan his master was discovered, he fled to Normandy for protection, which he received; "for truly," said the duke laughing, "he who with a handful of herbs saves a sea of blood deserves our compassion." He denied that the deed was by

Digitized by Google

his orders, but it came opportunely, and as I have said the duke often preferred venom to the sword. With the like benevolent motive he always offered to decide the fate of a battle by single combat. Alas! alas! he had a great heart, a great body, and a cunning wit withal to deal with secret foes: but he is gone—*requiescat in pace!*

When Conan's letter reached William, his brother-in-law the earl of Brabant was with him.

"By the mass," said the earl, "but Harold goes well to work, good brother! and we may profit by his lessons. Tostig is clever, bold, and wicked; he is idle in the camp; give him arms, money and men, and let him try to raise the North in his favour."

"The idea is good," returned William, "if he can do aught of himself; but I will give him neither money nor men, nor arms; I have none to spare; I will not divide my powers, but land in England with all the force I can collect under my own command, and depend upon no such ally as our good brother Tostig, who cannot cope with Harold, and is hated by the Saxons."

Tostig offended with the reception he had met with, departed from Normandy, and with a few ships and all the assistance that the Earl Baldwin could bestow, sailed from Bruges, plundered the Isle of Wight, and having persuaded Harold Hardrada to attempt the conquest of England, they closed their career at Stamford bridge, as has been already fully narrated in the former part of this history.

When William had received all possible assistance from his father-in-law, Baldwin, earl of Flanders and regent of France, especially by the complete connivance of the latter kingdom at his preparations, which many conceived to be greatly hostile to the interests of the French monarchy—when William, I say, had been so benefited by the old Earl Baldwin, the young Earl Baldwin said to the duke jokingly, "What part of England wilt thou bestow upon me?"

"I will give thee an answer ere thou sleepest, good brother," replied William; and in the evening he sent

Digitized by Google

Hugues de Grantmesnil with a sealed parchment, folded like a letter, and on the back were written these words :—

> "Beaufrere, en Angleterre aurez,
> Ce que dedans escript vos troverez."

Earl Baldwin eagerly broke open the seal as the packet had the air of a donation, but to his surprise the parchment was blank. This was taken as a joke by some, but we who knew Duke William were well aware, that he did this to show the great chiefs by whom he was surrounded, and who daily grew importunate, that he would not forestall his conquest by promises and over-gratitude before service had been paid in battle. In this there was great wisdom—for the battle of Hastings freed him from much obligation, which, had he been liberal in especial promises, must have been acquitted to the families of the dead. Whereas the duke ever said that those who fell in battle and himself were quits with prayers for their souls — he could not otherwise reward them, and for their families he could have no concern, they had rendered him no service; and of a verity the duke was right, for 'twas a hard task to satisfy those who survived the battle.

Now let me speak of those things which passed during the last three days before that noble army embarked to conquer England.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLVIII.

William being fond of jokes,
Much fun at Bishop Odo pokes,
Then following up his opening blow,
Sends for the wizard Angelo,
And says, "Cast spells about my plan sir."
"I will," replies the necromancer.

THE wind, as predicted by Angelo, remained foul for three days, and on the third, while blowing strong from the north, William sat with Matilda, talking over their future prospects: he told her of his interview with the wizard.

"I am surprised," said she, "that you listen to such predictions; they can have no influence on our fate, and your countenancing such men gives them an influence which they could not acquire of themselves."

"There art thou in error Matilda; for the more such men are opposed, the more weight and influence they acquire: it draws them into notice. It is well known that I laugh at such necromancers, and would, with no small satisfaction, roast them alive; but if I singed a hair of this Angelo's head, three-fourths of the troops would believe, not only all he might say against me in his agonies, but all that would be said for him. This is a great error which rulers commit: they persecute men and things into martyrdom, and turn that which is contemptible into something dangerous. My rule is not to provoke a war, unless I think that I can destroy mine enemy; I could kill Angelo, but he would be the real victor—we should both lose, neither could gain."

"I do not want you to destroy him," hastily cried the good Matilda, "William I only want you not to consult him."

"I know that," replied her husband; "but then I should lose an advantage which his prophecies can give me. Look at the influence he has: the whole army have belief in his art, even Odo! When his power is so great over the

Digitized by Google

moral feeling of my troops, it is not an engine to be trifled with. His having this great power emanates from the divine will of the Creator Matilda; and the same power has shown me how to use it so as to accomplish His divine will, that I should gain the English crown. Offended with the perjury of Harold, the Almighty has placed the means of punishing him in my hands; and it becomes me, as an humble instrument, to use the tools which He has given to labour withal."

"I admit that what you say is true," said the duchess, for she was much in love with the duke, and he was ever ready to prove to her and to all others, that what he chose to do was right; but for my part I never encourage such magicians. I think the evil spirits be too ready to come on earth of their own bad will, without calling them up as such strange men do.

"But would you believe that Odo had consulted this fellow?" said the duke, laughing.

"It argues a belief in him that I cannot but condemn in the prelate," replied the duchess; saying this, she took the arm of the duke, and they entered the apartment where dinner awaited them. The duke and duchess seated themselves upon the dais, and the chiefs and great attendants of the court took their various places at the magnificent board of William, where a profusion of gold and silver gave a brilliance to the banquet: a strong contrast to the heavy Saxon table of Harold, more conspicuous for the loads of food and drink which were supplied than for its elegance and ornament.

"Prosperity to our arms," said William, as he raised a golden tankard to his lips.

"We go as guests!" said De Harcourt. "Harold himself invited us to England."

"Yea verily; and promised us a warm welcome," observed Grantmesnil.

"*Pardi!* so much the better in winter," quoth Taillefer; "though I think it will be more poker than fire!"

"Your predictions are as good as Angelo's," said the duke; "where is he now? I want much to consult with him, for he is said to have much cunning lore."

Digitized by Google

"Not that sire," observed the bishop of Bayeux; "do not credit it."

"Yet there are those who have much confidence in his astrology," said Fitz-Osborne gravely. "I have known many knights and men-at-arms daily to frequent his cave, and he divined truly at Varaville."

"'Tis not good to trust to the black art over much," said Bulmer, a valiant and religious knight.

"Methinks Sir Bulmer is right," observed Sir Fitz-Philippe, a hardy chief. "Sir Vernon and myself were on our way to consult the seer this morning; but discussing as we rode along, we thought with Sir Mallet, that 'tis best to trust to God and a good sword."

My remark boy Wace was "Rather to God and our courage."

"Mallet is right," said Richmond, "for the magician cannot give courage to a coward, and may make a bold man timid."

"Religion," said the duchess, "is the only fountain from whence we can draw true courage. The necromancer can tell us whether we are to die or to survive any particular trial or danger, but religion teaches us not to care whether life or death awaits us, and to look indifferently upon the result."

"But lady," cried the brave Aubrey de Vere, Sir Talbot, and De la Hille, all three at once; "magic tells us what to guard against, and gives prudence to courage."

"By the rood yes!" said Aumerle, Beauchamp, and and many others; "we all consult Angelo."

"Come sirs," cried the duke, "let the holy prelate of Bayeux decide the dispute; he is a profound casuist. Speak Odo—is it lawful in the eye of our holy Church to consult an astrologer?" A slight blush passed over the face of the bishop.

"Don't, don't," whispered Matilda to the duke, but heedless of her intreaty, he continued,—

"Sirs, the priest shall decide in the Pope's name, whether or not we may enlist the devil into our good service to punish the perjured Harold."

"By the mass," quoth the bishop, "I do declare before ye all, brave sirs, that it is most unholy and unauthorized by

Digitized by Google

our holy father, the Pope, to have any communication with these vile pretenders to religion, whom I consider as most inimical to religion."

"Then good and reverend brother thou wouldst not in any extremity consult Angelo?" asked William, scarcely able to preserve his gravity.

"Not for worlds, as I hope for salvation!" exclaimed the prelate crossing himself and bowing devoutly.

"Swear by thy episcopal ring, good brother."

"I have it not upon my finger Duke William; I left it in my chamber."

"What, without thy ring! O bishop, bishop! I fear me thou hast pledged it with some fair maiden, to preserve her from sorcerers and incantations!"

The bishop grew red, and the relentless William followed up his attack.

"Sirs, look ye I pray, how our reverend pastor colours that his virtuous deeds should come to light; but tell us, good bishop, who is the fair dame that guards thy sacred ring, that we may all pay our respects to one so honoured."

"Nay, nay brother, speak not so lightly in thy raillery; I left my ring within my chamber, for, being full large, I feared in this cold weather I might lose it."

"By the holy rood ye priests are crafty men! Come, Odo, we will prove thee; for I wish thy virtue, now under sad suspicions, may be made manifest in this goodly company; especially as there are so many fair and excellent dames present. Come hither good page Wake; hie thee hence to the bishop's chamber with the Lady Matilda's compliments to the fair damsel whom thou—"

"No, no, no!" cried Matilda, colouring deeply and trying to stop his mouth with her pretty hand; "what is your liege about?"

"Whom thou wilt there find with the bishop's ring on her finger, saying her prayers," continued William, with the most provoking disregard to Matilda's intreaties, while with imperturbable gravity he put her hand away.

"He cannot find my ring; 'tis locked up."

"Oh fie! why did you lock her up?"

"Not the maiden, but the ring," replied Odo, getting

Digitized by Google

confused by the titter of the ladies, whose propriety was by this time quite overset.

"Not the maiden but the ring," repeated William gravely; "then pray allow me to ask your reverence what you have done with the maiden?"

"O fie, my lord, fie!" exclaimed Matilda, putting her hand upon the arm of her husband; "I prithee desist."

"No by our Lady! I will not; I will either have the maiden or the ring; or, if Odo so pleases, we will send for both. I appeal to this grave and virtuous company, shall we not have the ring that is locked up, or the maiden that is free in the bishop's chamber?"

"There is no maiden in my chamber," angrily observed the bishop. "Thou carriest thy joke too far my lord."

"Not so far as thou hast carried thy ring Odo; for my joke is at my command, and thy ring it seems is not."

"It is in my box, and I have the key here."

"O bishop, bishop, thou art a far better knight than thou art a bishop. Wake, bring hither the bishop's box; for, by the splendour of God! I will see thy ring Odo; and thou shalt swear upon it against magic!"

The box was brought, and the angry and confounded prelate opened the lock but the ring was not there.

A general laugh still more irritated the culprit; but when the duke of Normandy swore—"by the splendour of God," the joke was all on his side, if any joke there was.

"I have been robbed!" cried the bishop.

"Be assured it is the devil who has taken thy ring good brother; he always likes to play men of your holy calling a trick when he can, and I dare say thy ring has been conjured on to the finger of our friend the sorcerer."

"It is gone by robbery of some kind" said the bishop.

"I will tell thee how brother," said William in a serious tone; "I have been jesting with thee. I had supernatural information that thy ring should be taken from thee and given to the seer; that while on thy finger the spirit of darkness could not touch it; but if thou tookest it off and placed it away from thy person, that instant it would be conveyed to the sorcerer. Now Taillefer, thou art active, —away, and take two archers with thee to the cave of

Digitized by Google

Angelo; bring the seer here by force. I will see the end of this; for either I was in a strange dream, or in this matter there is some supernatural agency that affects our enterprise, and I will consult the seer. Such strange apparitions are not to be dealt with heedlessly."

The solemn tone in which duke William uttered this, greatly affected the nerves of his company, and a superstitious thrill pervaded the bosoms of all. In a short time Taillefer arrived with the sorcerer.

"Angelo," exclaimed the duke, "doff thy gloves!"

"Sir, excuse me; I dare not."

"Off with his gloves archers!"

The archers obeyed, and the bishop's ring shone brilliantly on the finger of Angelo.

"Where got ye that ring?" asked William; "I will stand between thee and all harm even if thou didst steal it."

"I did not steal it," replied Angelo; "a superior power placed it on my finger; if the reverend bishop of Bayeux will permit me to speak one word for his private ear, I will convince him and your liege that I came by this ring in a strange way, and that I am no thief. I can give the bishop ten rings, each worth ten such rings as this, saving their sacred character: wealth abounds with Angelo—he has no need to rob."

Here he whispered a few words to the bishop and the duke, in the recess of a casement. The latter returned to his seat.

"Sirs, this is miraculous! The wind is foul, Angelo, and after what thou hast told me, I must learn more from thy wonderful art. Say now man, for I have no time to lose, canst thou tell the fate of this army to-night?"

"Yea sire, if thou wilt give me time to cast my spells and read the stars."

"At what hour?"

"Come to my cave about eleven at night, and thou shalt hear all that Angelo can tell, with this proviso—if the fates speak to thee of disasters and failure thou wilt not rage and destroy the seer, who speaks only what higher powers decree, and who has not himself any influence upon fate."

Digitized by Google

"I promise thee safety."

The seer bowed and departed.

"At eleven then sirs, we will attend upon the seer, and hear what he can foretell. Thy scruples, bishop of Bayeux, are removed.

Here the bishop first threw up his eyes to heaven and exclaimed, "Entirely!" then humbly he bowed, and lowered them to the earth, crossing his hands upon his broad and portly chest, which, according to his custom when not officiating, was covered with a strong coat of chain armour.

The banquet being finished, all retired to their various avocations till the appointed hour arrived.

CHAPTER XLIX.

Angelo's cave creates much fear,
But William is promised victory clear,
Well pleased he turns, away to go,
But hears more than he likes to know.

THE night was of a pitchy darkness when the eleventh hour was marked by the watches and wards of the camp, who went their rounds to see that all was quiet; but all was not quiet; for William had given orders that those who pleased might go to hear the prophet tell their fate, and thousands were wending towards the cave of Angelo; and lest the crowd should press, guards were stationed round, within which circle none but chiefs were to enter. The cave of the sorcerer was near the sea-side; a mass of rocks surrounded it, a small plain lay behind these rocks, and round this plain, which was a mere meadow, the hills formed a theatre of which the "proscenium," if I may so speak, was formed by the rocks. The arrangement of the ground produced echoes so strong, so distinct and numerous, as to appear supernatural. Dark was the scene, and silent, save the heavy-sounding surge which, driven by the

Digitized by Google

cold northern blast, broke foaming along the shore with fierce but regular roar, sending its spray up sparkling high above the crags which formed the cave. The mouth of this last was somewhat raised and did not face the waters, being screened off by other rocks; and when the moon shone bright, often would the peasants go to the nearest hills to gaze if the northern breeze was strong, for then the sea spray, thrown up behind the cave, would catch the moonbeams and appear like a shower of fire. The cause of this beautiful appearance was well known; yet it was called the "magician's fire," and added to the superstitious fear of the place.

William, always watchful against treason, went in full armour accompanied by his most trusty followers on foot. The rest followed; for in that short time such a superstitious dread fell upon all, that no man would have gone to the cave alone, nor together, until the duke himself went. I did not much like the matter, boy Wace, but still I went, for I had a misgiving that some strange thing would happen, and I heard in the dark many teeth chatter, whether from fear or cold I know not. At the cave Angelo stood above upon the rock.

"Place thy great company upon the hills around, noble sire."

On hearing this the word flew from man to man, and in a short time fifty thousand armed men clustered on the hills around, The low buzz and hum and voices told us what a multitude was crowded around, but the plain was left vacant for the leaders: in truth few liked to approach too near.

On the top of the rocky hillock a large cauldron was boiling; the sorcerer stood by William.

"Wilt thou that I begin?" said he.

"Yes" said the duke, and then added in a whisper, "Taillefer, attend close."

Angelo mounted the rocks slowly, while the strong Taillefer, close wrapped in his cloak and unseen in the darkness, followed near to him: the light of the fire above now showed the magician with his slouched hat and wand; he cast a powder into the cauldron, a bright blue flame arose, the light of which flashed and sparkled on the masses of

Digitized by Google

armed warriors on the surrounding hills, giving a gaunt cadaverous look to men's faces, all grim and ghastly to behold; each seemed like a corpse in armour, and yet not dead, but grinning in fiendish pleasure. The coruscations of reflected light on the armour were beautiful, as with flickering radiance they danced on the different groups.

"Spirits! accept ye of our offering?" cried the magician. The bright fire ceased to burn and all was dark.

"The spirits are propitious great duke, what wilt thou?"

"Shall we conquer Harold and rule in England?"

A shrill voice replied,—

> "Thou shalt die a king in France,
> Wielding strong a conqueror's lance!"

"Shall we win the first battle and the last?" said Harcourt.

> "Ye lose at first, ye win at last,
> For both in one your fates are cast."

"Shall we cross the sea safely and beat the Saxons?" demanded William fiercely. "Let your spirit speak plain, if he have spirit in him."

"Bravely spoken noble duke," cried many voices; "speak spirit, or devil, or whatever thou art; we and our leaders fear thee not."

> "When the wind blows a southern breeze,
> In safety ye shall pass the seas,
> The doom of Harold then is sealed,
> And Normandy survives the field."

"What portends the comet," demanded Eustache, earl of Boulogne, the fiercest enemy of the house of Godwin.

> "That fiery vapour in the skies,
> A change of dynasty implies,
> Portends a short but blazing reign,
> Further of fate ye ask in vain.

"Sorcerer come down, we want no more. Soldiers, England is ours!" exclaimed William loudly, and a shout of joy answered him from the multitudes in the depths of the surrounding rocks. The sorcerer and Taillefer descended,

Digitized by Google

and were speaking to William when a loud laugh was heard, wonderfully echoed among the hills. All noise was hushed.

"What voice is that, sir enchanter?" said the duke.

"I know not sire," replied Angelo; I am in the hands of spirits Duke William; I know not what may happen when spirits are roused; I am answerable only for my own predictions: if that be a spirit he is more powerful than any that my magic can deal with."

"Stand by me then" said the duke. The laugh was again heard; and then a third time it went forth, echoing through the hills and the gloomy vale with a fiendish sound.

"Speak to it Angelo," said the duke.

"I dare not: I know not what its responses may be."

"Are thine own incantations true?"

"As true as steel" replied Angelo.

"Then I fear not what this ribald spirit says, for the soldiers have faith in thee."

"Wouldst know thy fate Norman?" cried the unknown goblin; "behold it!" As the shrill demoniac voice uttered these words a bright vivid flame arose, and a burning placard appeared in the air with the words "*Family Feuds!—Infamy!—Death!*" written in large characters; in an instant after the placard was in flames, and then the darkness was once more entire. Again the elfish laugh arose, louder and more tauntingly than before; again its echoes reverberated through the hills, and as the sounds died away the noise of the breaking billows arose on the air in monotonous succession—silence and thrilling horror were upon the host.

"Rush up and seize that caitiff," cried William furiously. "'Tis a trick!" Taillefer alone obeyed the order.

"By the rood! but there is no one here," said he.

"'Twere best to leave the place" said William. "The more we move in this the worse the effect." Hardly had the words left his mouth when shrieking and groans were heard as of many in torments and the screams roused all the echoes. Taillefer was himself uncomfortable, but could not see any one, and descended. The affrighted thousands fled in the darkness.

Digitized by Google

The Norman duke, angry and disappointed, now resolved to discover the offending spirit, and give it good reasons for uttering such groans.

"By the splendour of God!" quoth he, "but I will so handle thy devils sir enchanter, that they shall find earth more hot than hell, and hie them back again! Here bowmen of the guard, surround this rock, search it well, pull forth that laughing rascal. I will tell him his fortune quickly, and prove my prophecies on his carcass."

Taillefer, encouraging the reluctant archers to do their duty, surrounded the rock, and with a few rushed into the cave; quickly he came forth, pale, staggering, and gasping for breath. "Sire," he said, "the devil is at home, but receives no company without special invitation."

"What meanest thou sir knight? I am in no mood for thy ribaldry."

"By the mass! sire, neither am I, being nearly choked; but no mortal man can enter that cave without death. I had not taken three paces before I was half suffocated. Perhaps our friend Angelo here can penetrate his own dwelling; but in that case he has lungs which no other man can boast of."

"I cannot enter, sire; the cave is in the possession of some spirit," said Angelo, who had attempted it, and quickly retreated.

"Thrust him in with spears! By the rood! sir sorcerer, but thou shalt enter in despite of thy pretences. I will teach thee that Duke William is not to be trifled with."

"Come" said Taillefer, pushing in Angelo with a shove that sent the poor man reeling for many yards within the mouth of the cavern. "Get thee in, I long to see a *tête-à-tête* between the devil and a juggler, for though I was one of the trade I never saw my master." Angelo attempted to return, but fell senseless and groaning.

"I die!" cried he, "I die unless you pull me out."

"Shall I pull him out sire?" asked the good-natured Taillefer.

"If you like, but a sorcerer the less will do the world no harm," answered the duke sulkily.

Digitized by Google

Taillefer rushed in, but again fell back and dropped upon the ground almost senseless. "It is impossible" said he faintly.

William, excited by the danger, cried out,—"What afraid all of ye? Afraid of a spirit, poltroons? I will take him out though all the devils in hell opposed me," and placing his hand over his mouth he walked in, seized the senseless sorcerer by the neck, and coming out, pleased with the exploit, said laughingly, but very pale, "There is your necromancer Taillefer, and methinks he has not been kindly treated by his friends."

"By the rood! sire," answered the scarcely-recovered knight, crossing himself, and somewhat sarcastically, "but there seems to be only one in all this good company for whom the prince of darkness has any respect."

"Say rather but one knight that has strength and courage enough to prove the adventure," retorted William, and returned to his camp.

The next day all was gloomy and ill-boding to the army, and many departed despairing of success for an expedition which Heaven and magic seemed equally to oppose. For although the words of the spirit were somewhat more explicit at the last, still Harold might fall, Normandy survive the field, and yet the whole expedition might fail! In short, many were the opinions formed, and many men went away, but cupidity and the desire of glory, the two great tools with which Duke William worked, held their never-failing influence: despite of individual desertion he still mustered sixty thousand men-at-arms, for new levies daily poured into his cantonments, replacing losses by men of a more resolute and enterprising spirit.

"After all," observed the duke, "these cravens are better away than with us, Fitz-Osborne, for they would only eat and drink, and then run away if we had any reverse of fortune. I am therefore glad we had our fortunes told last night; it has purified the army of its dross. They who cannot face a necromancer can never face Harold." The words of the chief quickly spread through the host; "*God and a just cause!*" became the word among the soldiers, and ere the following night fell, the soldiers had in a great measure thrown off the despondency produced by the Vala's juggling.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER L.

Rumours, rumours, are flying about,
Yet Editha's heart is valiant and stout,
Troops are assembled and speeches made,
And horsemen gallop o'er hill and glade.

On the night of the prophecy, Frica, having got all the information she required, departed in a well-manned boat, which had been concealed in a neighbouring cave from whence Canute and his chosen crew assisted Frica in her cries. And it is here to be remarked, that several of this crew, having been initiated into the secret opening of this cave, repaired to it after the battle, and for many years infested the Normans on the seas.

On reaching England Frica repaired to London.

"Lady Editha, I left the Norman army, four days sithence; it then abided a fair gale to blow from the southern pole. 'Tis now two days since the wind has been such as the Norman duke seeks: be assured therefore that his army is at sea, and will be on our coast ere two days more shall pass: even this night it may arrive!"

"Thy news is welcome Frica! Knowest thou not that Harold has slain Tostig and Harald Hardraada, and destroyed their army in the north?"

"Indeed! and is the king of Norway, the stern Harald, gathered to the halls of the Valhalla? How fell the hero —by the hand of the Saxon king?"

"No Frica; by an arrow, which traversed his neck."

"Ha! sayest thou so!" cried the Vala, as her countenance beamed bright with a gleam of joy, which seemed to fill her mind; "then I have still hopes of victory."

"What mean ye Frica;" asked Edith, with an anxious look.

"Lady, dost remember the apparition of the head and the arrow? We thought 'twas Harold the Saxon; but no,

Digitized by Google

'twas Harald the Norwegian that was to fall by the arrow of the Saxon! A load is taken from off the spirits of Frica."

"Now good Vala, no time must be lost; go thou to thy tower, call the Saxons of Sussex around ye, prophesy to them that the Normans are at sea, and coming. Do this ere they arrive. Tell the chiefs to call forth their retainers and lead them to the coast that the Norman may find no spot unguarded. Away Frica! away! I will send off by swift couriers to let the king know the intelligence you bring. I hold a hundred men prepared, and ere many minutes elapse ten will fly along the road to York! away!"

Saying these words the queen called for ten of her runners.

"Saxons, much now depends upon your speed; depart upon the instant for York, and tell the king that the Normans are at sea, and expected hourly on the coast, being sixty thousand in number, horse and foot, furnished with all things needful for war, and bringing with them, in pieces ready to be put together upon the moment, large wooden castles. Ye, Eldred, Hardinge, Elwyne, and Alfred, urge your way straight to the king, calling upon all in his name to furnish the swiftest horses, that your errand may be done with all speed; but let no man, nor thing, nor idle talk upon the way, arrest your course, and great guerdon shall the first that reaches the king receive. Away!"

"To you six others I give command that ye follow hard upon those I have just sped upon their journey; give the same news as ye proceed, seeing each chief as ye tread the northern road, and say to all that they must march south with all their strength upon the city of London, where fresh orders shall await their coming. There is no time to prepare letters; but repeat to them the watchword 'South,' we have before advertised them of it, and they will lend full credence to the orders ye bear. Away! and reward shall await good service."

Then sending for the archbishop of Canterbury she gave him the intelligence received from Frica, and desired him to send couriers to raise the west and south in arms.

"Would that the king were here!" said the archbishop.

"Would he were, right reverend father; but 'twill not

Digitized by Google

be long, and we must act for him till he comes, and lose no time, for William will be upon us unawares and ravage the land. How many soldiers can this great city furnish under arms ere nightfall?"

"Sixty thousand men is the return of those who can bear arms within the city walls," said Stigand; "but I fear me twenty thousand would be the most that we could assemble within so short a space. 'Tis now nearly mid-day lady."

"Then do, good Stigand, issue a proclamation calling forth the Londoners to assemble on the Strand in arms within the hour, to march, headed by their queen, towards Sussex, for on that coast will William land, as Harold always said."

"Excellent lady, thy resolution is worthy of thy state. I too will accompany thee towards the coast."

"No Stigand, thou must not quit London; 'tis the seat of all exertion, and demands thy great abilities. It is for me to rouse the Saxon warriors to a high enthusiastic spirit, but 'tis thine to direct its efforts till the king arrives."

"Be thy bidding law to Stigand, most noble lady; I go to issue the proclamation and despatch the couriers to the south and west."

In a few hours forty thousand armed Saxons marched out of London, and formed their camp ten miles from the city; and ere the night fell the coast from Dover to Dorchester swarmed with sharp Saxon eyes, all sweeping the horizon with their keen glances for the Norman fleet. The alarm ran so fast, that ere day broke rumour had reached the Land's End, and, thence running north, met its own echoes descending from Bristol. The south was now in arms: bands of hundreds and of thousands hourly poured into London, and ere night the queen beheld sixty thousand warriors in her camp.

"Now Saxons, *my* work is done," said she to the army. "The king left me to guard the Saxon crown from being stolen by the Normans without your knowledge. I have kept good watch—the robbers approach, my duty has been faithfully performed, you are ready to defend your rights. If they are taken by force, it is your fault. Saxons, I trust the crown to your good battle-axes; but I will not quit the

Digitized by Google

army. I will remain and share the battle: the Saxon blood of Editha longs to behold the glorious deeds of her countrymen!"

The shouts of the soldiers rent the air, and were answered from the neighbouring heights by fresh parties pouring in from the country.

"There comes a man riding hard" said Elstan, who was resting on his lance behind the queen, his huge axe slung over his shoulder; "methinks he brings some news of the Normans."

All eyes were instantly bent upon the horseman, who came galloping furiously down the hill. The heart of Editha sunk, a boding feel of coming evil pressed upon her unaccountably: she felt that the man she beheld coming was the bearer of her fate, and the colour fled from her face, but all were so intent upon the stranger, none saw her pallid cheek.

"Fie Editha!" said she to herself, "art thou a coward—shall the wife of Harold tremble? Shall the queen be the first to show fear—shall she belie all her pretences to courage? Shall she who has most to lose be the worst to defend—oh, no, no! I will be worthy of my Saxon lineage and my husband."

The strange rider now overtook a troop; they set up a loud hurrah and waved their arms; soon he came close to the camp. Shouts arose, and "The Normans! the Normans!" rung far and wide. The horseman, on arriving at the spot where the queen stood, leaped from his saddle.

"Noble mistress, our foes have landed at Pevensey," said he, bowing to kiss the fair hand of the queen.

"Welcome news brave sir, for the duke has long kept us in suspense as to his visit; we will receive him courteously. Perhaps 'twill prove more difficult to leave us than to come, and yet find no over-pleasure in sojourning! Good brother Gurth, despatch the runners to the king at York; they are ready, and keep their horses accoutred along the road, so that short time will pass ere Harold will be here to lead his people against the proud Normans."

The couriers swiftly departed, and Editha retired to strengthen herself by secret prayer, for the crisis of her fate

Digitized by Google

had arrived: it depended upon the uncertain issue of a battle, and the exertion necessary to appear calm, before the men by whom she was surrounded, had nearly exhausted her strength. There I will leave her for the present, and recount the movements of the Norman army after the night of the prophecy.

CHAPTER LI.

Quand li dus, primes fors issi,
Sous les paumes ayant chaï,
Sempre y ont leué grand cri,
Et disoient tuit: "Mal signe a chi!"
Et il lour en a haut crié:
"Seignours, par la resplendour Dé,
La terra ay o deux mains saisie,
Sans chalenge ni est m'es guerpie,
Tout est votre, quanque y a."

THE words of the duke of Normandy had, as I before stated, raised the spirits of his soldiers, and turned their superstitious belief in magic to confidence in the dictates of religion. The pope had sanctioned the enterprise; William was the just heir to the Saxon crown, Harold was a perjured traitor—it was righteous to make war upon him! These were the great and primary points to be considered, and left our consciences clear: our invasion was a holy act! The minor motives were not allowed to be questioned in our hearts; for the moment we buried in oblivion the love of plunder, of murder, of rapine! That the wishes of the Saxons had some small concern in the choice of their king we could not admit; the thousands of innocents that must perish in the coming war was not our affair, but coals of fire upon the head of Harold! All these matters were put out of sight, or, if mentioned, were necessary evils unavoidable in war, as much so as the dangers incurred by the army. The man who defended his country against the invader was a caitiff that deserved his fate, and of course his estate ought to be given to the brave man that slew the

Digitized by Google

traitor. The invasion was the most virtuous of all virtues, for it was lucrative virtue, and would leave men's bodies and souls in the most flourishing state of palmy enjoyment. Harold's perjury was the scapegoat which was charged with our sins, and would bear them far away into the desert!

In the midst of our moralizing the wind veered round to the south, and the order went forth "*To your ships!*" Then boy, was there commotion through that mass! Horses and men, loaded with baggage, hurrying to the beach; hundreds of animals resisting embarkation; cries and shouts of joy, and laughing exultation through the host; but there, among those joyous thousands, were seen sad hearts sorrowing for those left behind; thousands of fair eyes were seen weeping a last adieu, and fair arms giving a last embrace! Women sat on the beach with clasped hands, and looks fixed on particular ships, that full charged with their warlike cargoes cast loose their sails in preparation. These heaved anchor to the chant of victory, while on the nearest beach groups exchanged waving of hands and loud prayers, and animating words to cheer passed from those on board and from those on shore. But there was also sobbing grief bursting from infants' lips, and the deep wailings of mothers; hundreds wended slowly towards their homes, at every turn casting one look more upon the scene of separation.

Contrasting with these weeping creatures were many stout Normans, who had left their lands and were ruminating on the scene before them; their heroic wives and mothers urged them on—"Fight for thy duke as he fights for you! we gave thee not the iron mail to spin in! get ye hence to the wars like soldiers; fate is in the hands of God." The young soldiers sprung into the boat, all joyous and laughing; their spirits elastic and proud! yet many a lover's heart beat fast within his iron haubergeon, as he saw his mistress lingering with her friends upon the shore. Husbands in groups tore themselves from the clasping arms of wives for the last time; the cold feel of their rude armour against those gentle breasts was the last record for them of days never to return! Nor were there wanting boasts, and

Digitized by Google

thousands of ruthless men, breathing nought but slaughter and rapine and corrupting the very air with their ribald merriment: men, or rather fiends, vomited hot from hell to devastate—men whose fierce and cruel tempers William himself could scarcely hold in check. But yet, through all, there was a glorious exaltation of high and courageous hopes, a buoyancy of spirits, an assurance of victory.

Now the ships were filled, their sails all bellying with the breeze, the last armed man on board, the last anchor up, and the sails of three thousand vessels covered the sea with moving canvas. A host was on the bosom of the deep; a greater from the shore gazed upon the parting multitude! The giant chief for an instant looked proudly over the glorious scene; then turning to his wife, he clasped her to his broad mailed chest.

"Adieu Matilda! within a month I shall be crowned at Westminster." The hero sprung into his ship. Matilda could no longer command herself.

"O God of mercies, preserve him!" she exclaimed, and burst into tears: the pang was catching, and a loud long heart-rending scream of agony broke forth and passed, sweeping along that great crowd which thronged the shore; it rose high in air, and the shrill sound of woe was borne by the breeze towards the floating warriors, by whom the wailing sound was answered with loud animating cheers.

The *Mora* shot like an arrow through the fleet.

The duke stood alone and conspicuous on the poop, clad in brilliant armour.

"Your oars! your oars!" he cried, with a voice heard far and wide, and even on the shore. "The sails want help!" In an instant long sweeps were protruded from every ship, the strong rowers bent to the stroke, and the sea became a mass of foam as the springy blades cast it scornfully towards the land. Then the crowds upon the beach were roused to exultation, and tonsured monks held aloft their crucifixes, and women high waved their tear-wet handkerchiefs, and arms were stretched to heaven, and blessings followed the parting convoy.

The *Mora* still shot far ahead, amidst the shouts of the warriors, and as the wide sheet of canvas floated into the

Digitized by Google

distance, the sun dropped beneath the wave, and the day closed. A few sad women yet lingered upon the strand, comfortless, despairing: at last they also went, and the calm evening sea gently rippled along that silent deserted shore!

When darkness fell upon the ocean, Duke William hoisted a bright light at the mast-head of the *Mora*, and all the other ships steered accordingly. The night passed tranquilly, and light winds gently wafted them towards the English shore; but when the grey streaks of the dawn appeared in the east, and all eyes on board the *Mora* swept the horizon, searching for the fleet, no ship was visible. The sun arose in all his golden effulgence, flinging his gorgeous light across the rippling expanse, illuminating the waste of waters, yet not a ship was there! all hearts but one, on board the *Mora*, quailed at the sight: a lonely bark upon the sea, divided from the fleet, and sailing singly towards a hostile shore!

"O glorious sun!" cried the duke with exultation, "I hail thee as the harbinger of victory! Thou shinest on me, and me alone! This is a noble scene my friends—a presage of our glory; look at our arms, see how they glitter, gilded by the sun himself! let us rejoice! lower our sails and let the *Mora* lay to, we will feast in the fulness of our gladness; serve us up food presently, and lose no time, that we may finish our repast ere the fleet appears. Be quick! and let our wines be of the richest and high spiced, that we may rejoice. Hie thee to the mast-head, brave Airard, and count how many of my ships thou seest. Methinks, ere this yon brilliant sun has shown them where their king abides their coming."

"I see no ships to count," said Eustache of Boulogne.

"O brave Eustache! a chief sees many things beyond his followers' ken!" replied William, laughing in joyous mood, "but up, up good Airard, and tell us what you see."

Airard reached the mast-head with great agility, but Taillefer was there before him.

"A ship! a ship!" shouted the latter.

"Another! and another!" cried Airard in the same breath.

Digitized by Google

"More yet," answered William; "that won't do; curse on the idle knaves! they have been asleep all night, dreaming of their wives in Normandy; come comrades, here's a health to our fair dames; fill high your goblets; every bondsman on board shall be a franklin when we land in England."

"More ships!" cried Airard; "there is a forest of masts in sight—a whole fleet."

"Heaven forefend that it be the Saxon fleet," said Fitz-Osborne in a whisper to William.

"Ha! ha! ha! were it so I would catch them all, my good Fitz Osborne, but seest thou not that they come from the south?"

"They come on fast sire," cried Airard from above; "they have all their oars out."

Soon they came within hail of the *Mora*, and William cried out "Forward for England!" The command was answered by cheers. The *Mora* was again under sail, and in a few hours the sight of England was welcomed by shouts, and the fleet in compact order reached Pevensey. The tide was at the flow, and by William's order the vessels run full upon the beach; not an enemy was to be seen, except here and there a Saxon scout observing them from the heights but no man landed till the tide receded and left the ships dry upon the shore. Then the duke of Normandy wound his loud horn, and three thousand vessels disgorged their living cargoes. Sixty thousand fighting men stood armed for battle on the soil of England! The first who left the ships were the archers, dressed in short close jackets, with their hair close shaven to the ears like priests—they scoured the country in front; then came the men-at-arms in battle array, and, advancing a little, occupied the hard ground. The horses and baggage, and the workmen followed with iron and wood-work for three strong castles, which were instantly erected on the strongest ground.

Lastly landed Duke William, in complete armour, and in sight of his whole army. Scarcely had his foot touched the ground when he tripped and fell, stretched at full length upon the earth. A groan ran through the Norman ranks, and a loud cry of "*Mauvais signe!*" was heard.

Digitized by Google

"Know, my brave companions," cried William with a clear far-sounding voice, as he sprung upon his feet and extended his hands filled with earth. "Know that God has invested me with the land, He made me seize it with both hands. With His aid and yours, my brave companions, I will conquer this country, and if any man dares to dispute this, by the splendour of God, he shall do battle with me!"

Cheers from the army answered this speech, and enthusiasm was at its height. Then leaped forth the gallant Taillefer, and running to a thatched house, that stood hard by, seized a handful of the straw which he brought to his lord.

"Sire, je vous baille la saisine de cette terre, et de ce royaulme, et je vous promets que ayncois qu'il soyt ung moys, je vous verrai seigneur."

"Where is our friend Angelo the astrologer?" asked William.

"Sire, one boat has been lost, and in that boat was Angelo."

"He prophesied that I should pass safely" said the duke; then pausing he added, "Il n'est pas saige qui mieulx pense d'autrui que de soi! tante fois, Dieu merci, je suis passé; je ne sais qui sera du sourplus." Then William mounted his war-horse, and attended by twenty-five knights, rode forth to reconnoitre, but no enemy appeared. The difficulty of the roads obliged him to return on foot, and William de Fitz-Osborne being suddenly seized with illness, the Norman duke took his friend's armour, braced it over his own, and thus loaded with a double suit of mail arrived at the camp. This circumstance delighted the army, who admired the strength and generosity of their chief; soldiers love to see a leader willing to assist those under his command, especially when such assistance exhibits personal strength, or is given with some sacrifice of comfort; they will bear the haughtiness of a chief towards others, and even be proud of it, but will not bear it towards themselves. Both William and Harold, boy Wace, were stern and even cruel to the disobedient soldiers; but those chiefs were ever free and jocund in their accost to the meanest pikemen in the camp. I have seen them both bear rough jokes from the lowest soldier, when the proudest man in Normandy scarcely dared to speak his

Digitized by Google

mind before either of them. Such indeed was the love the Norman soldiers bore to Harold, that many thought the duke was glad to send him home to England. When he fell at Hastings, our soldiers grieved much for his death; a recreant knight basely stabbed his body as it lay upon the earth, and all the soldiers were wroth with the caitiff. Duke William punished the vile fellow; and the chivalry of Normandy rejoiced at his disgrace.

The army now seized the castle of Pevensey, and then marched along the coast to Hastings, where William issued an order forbidding pillage.

"The country is mine" said he, "and I will not allow it to be pillaged." Next morning the duke had a letter from a rich Norman who had long lived in England, and was used as a spy against William. This man sent the following caution: "Harold has been victorious; he marches towards you with all his forces; they are far superior in number and quality to yours. Fortify yourself therefore, and do not venture on a battle." This message was dictated by Editha to prevent the advance of the Normans by every art, but the stratagem did not deceive Duke William.

"Tell your master," said he to the messenger, "that I shall not hide behind fortifications, but will give Harold battle as soon as I can."

Editha next despatched spies, who entered the Norman camp; but it is time to trace the movements of Harold.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER LII.

In this chapter a great deal is said :
Most of it out of old Mallet's head.

HAROLD gained his victory over Hardraada and Tostig, on the 25th September, 1066, and Duke William landed at Pevensey on the 28th of the same month. On the 3rd of October, Harold received the news at York : he put his army in march for the south, and on the 13th of the month it was drawn up in battle array on the heights of Hastings, one hundred and fifty miles distant from York ! When I, who am an old and an experienced warrior, consider the wild troops that Harold commanded, and that the Saxons, although they be a brave nation, are little skilled in war, and are ill disciplined—when I consider these things, Robert Wace, I marvel much at the wonderful celerity of Harold's march, which showed his own great abilities, and the influence he had over his army. Nor can I give credit to the assertion that this great king had disgusted his soldiers by refusing them the plunder taken from the Norwegian army, after the battle of Stamford Bridge. In truth that plunder had been collected within a few days before the battle, which was fought to recover the pillage from the enemy, as much as to prevent further ravages of the land ; and the owners of the booty were present to claim it : how then could the just Harold refuse to give men their own property back, because it had been a few days, it may have been but a few hours, in the hand of an enemy ? Had Harold acted with injustice to his army at Stamford Bridge, his soldiers would not have followed him in that long and rapid march to Hastings, and there fought with devoted courage ; and it would be a matter much to be marvelled at, that a man famed for his generosity, no less than for his ability as a warrior, should suddenly change his character, and affront his brave army after a great victory, when another power-

Digitized by Google

ful foe awaited him, and a terrible combat for life and crown was to be fought ere many days should pass! But men who reflect will judge, that Harold either refused to give to the soldiers what did not justly appertain unto them and by such a refusal earned the approbation of all honourable warriors, and consequently strengthened himself in the opinion of his army; or which, boy Wace, is very possible, for rich men are always bad soldiers, he feared that if he gave the plunder to the troops, they would on the coming march steal away to their own homes with their booty, and ere he reached London his forces would have dwindled down to nothing; he would thus have been a general without an army! History affords examples—ay boy! I have seen it happen to our great conqueror, that when his generals grew rich, and had gained immortal honour by the efforts of his genius, they grew slack in zeal for war, and for their country.

Oh! there is a passive treason in war that is worse than desertion to the enemy! It is committed by men who know they have gained riches, and think that they have gained reputation by their own genius; and in this erring mood they abandon, sometimes they turn upon the hero by whom they have been created. Against such treason good fortune and unsparing rigour may prevail; but genius and generosity must always succumb. It is therefore not at all improbable that Harold wisely delayed giving rewards to his troops till the war was over. Which of these motives made him refuse the plunder of the Norwegian camp I know not; but certes he acted therein with great judgment, and brought down his army to the south in good array for battle, as they proved upon our mails. I have digressed good Robert, for when I speak upon these matters my old blood grows hot in my veins; I love not to hear slander cast upon great leaders like Harold and William, even by an enemy. I have seen them in battle like pointed rocks amidst the turmoil of the stormy waves: are we to stand by and hear the base round pebbles of the beach raise their grating snarls as every wave washes them to and fro. No boy; old warriors may wither with age, old armour may rust upon the wall, but the memory

Digitized by Google

of a victorious leader fades not. Go thy ways good Robert Wace; I will write no more to-day. This is the 14th of October. I will spend it with the dead. But stop good youth; before thou leavest me take down my Hastings armour from the armoury wall, and bring it hither; also my helm and mace, sword and shield; there is no lance: I drove it through the body of a Saxon, who with his axe was about to strike the great duke. I had no time to withdraw it, and after the battle there it was found. William took it, and hung it up in his own armoury.

"Mallet" said he, "I love to look upon thy lance; it tells me of thy great strength, thy great courage, and thy great fidelity; but for that lance I should never have been King of England, and as thou wilt not speak for thyself, but art ever as dumb as thine own mace, this lance shall speak for thee." Indeed, he rewarded my poor service with large domains, and created me high chamberlain of England. Go, then kind clerk, bring hither my armour and leave me; I wish to be alone.

The following day the knight thus continued his narrative:—

Harold and his victorious army, forty thousand strong, entered London amidst the acclamations of the people, who poured forth to meet the conqueror of the renowned Hardraada. But he continued his march to the camp of Editha, which they reached that evening. The sun was sinking towards the horizon when the northern army came in sight. The troops of Editha were drawn up in battle array, fronting towards the enemy, but faced about to welcome their king. Editha was on horseback. Her lovely tresses were in their usual thick braids, and the golden fly was her only ornament; she held a small crown in her hand, and when the army was drawn up, said:—

"I will not place this on my brow while an enemy is in England, take it hence to the palace in London; there must be now no ornament for Saxon heads, except Saxon helmets:" and as she said this, she gave the crown to a chamberlain who stood by. The graceful dignity of her manner, and her brilliant beauty, captivated the whole army: it was an army of slaves to her loveliness that Editha led. No man was there

Digitized by Google

who would not have sacrificed his life to defend her, even had she not been queen of England. There was a charm in all the swan-necked lady said and did, Robert Wace, that no man's heart could stand against. She captivated all.

When the king's army appeared a loud shout from the queen's forces welcomed them. The royal standard waved high in air above the head of Editha, who was mounted on a white palfrey. The troops clashed their arms against their shields for joy, and the wild sounds were re-echoed by the tired soldiers of Harold, all covered with dust, and their armour rusty, as they arrived with a heavy measured tramp. There fathers and sons and brothers met in gladness, and a transient joy reigned through the field: Editha, who had remained unmoved till the king approached, now galloped towards him, leaped from her horse, and in an instant found herself clasped in her husband's arms.

"Editha, I am clad in foul habiliments to kiss a lady, but they best become Harold now; I have vowed I will not scour my armour till I scour the land from these invaders. Warlike queen, let's see thy soldiers; after that I shall take measures for the war."

Harold reviewed the army of Editha, and found that in all he had nearly one hundred thousand fighting men; but they were not armed and accustomed to war, like the well-appointed forces of his rival. Nevertheless, he resolved to give battle.

"William will not advance against London," was his remark; "he will take castle after castle, town after town, and ravage the country far and wide. I am therefore resolved to march upon him, and, encamping close, I will fortify my position, and compel him to attack me where his numerous cavalry will not avail."

"'Twere better to await the battle here," said Gurth, the king's brother.

"No," answered Harold. "Had I waited for Hardraada what an error I should have committed. He would have now been ravaging Northumbria, our army still watching him like cowards, while William rioted at his pleasure in the south. It is better to encamp close by him, and force him to attack us at a disadvantage; if we repulse

Digitized by Google

him, his army must be destroyed; if he beats us his victory will cost him dear, and he cannot recruit his army. We shall only retreat a few miles, and in two days our army will be more strong than ever. England cannot be conquered in one battle, or the Saxons deserve to be made slaves."

"Still I hold my opinion," replied Gurth sternly; "not fighting we shall waste his army and be certain of victory. There is no parallel between your position now, and that in which you were placed last month. You had then no time to lose; it was absolutely necessary to fight at Stamford Bridge—now it is not. You have but one enemy to deal with—draw him out from the sea and from his ships."

Harold, flushed with victory, resolved upon battle; but however imprudent this course was, still, had he survived the battle, there is reason to believe that we should scarcely have conquered the country. Harold would very quickly have replaced the men who fell at Hastings, and profiting by experience, he could then have played the game recommended by Gurth. The death of King Harold was the secret of William's conquest.

The next day the English and Norman armies encamped within five miles of each other. Harold rode forth, attended only by his brother Gurth. They ascended a hill and examined the Norman camp. When the king saw our numbers and discipline, it is said he repented having approached so near without increasing his numbers, but Gurth said—

"It is now too late. A retreat would dishearten the army."

This conversation we could never be certain of, as the brothers were alone. Harold placed his army in position opposite the Norman army. His spies returned.

"Well," said the monarch, "what have you seen?"

"Everything great king: we were detected and brought before the duke; and, by our Lady, we expected nothing less than present death, when Duke William ordered us to be shown every part of the camp, and gave us to eat and to drink, and sent us back to tell you."

"By the sword of Odin," cried Harold, "but the Norman

Digitized by Google

is civil! he shall have more meat and drink than mouths to feed, ere two days pass over his head: but tell me all ye saw?"

"We saw more priests than warriors sire. The camp is filled with them—all smooth shaven on the upper lip, and the hair cut round the head, up even with their ears."

"Ha, ha, ha! Those shavelings, my friends, are valiant warriors accustomed to do battle: the Normans do not wear moustaches like the Saxons and the ancient Britons; they shave close, and those whose hair is shaven close round the head, even with their ears, are bold archers and arblast men. Ye will know more of them anon. By the bow of the god Ullir, but they shoot well! and none can shoot like Duke William, eh! good Elstan, what sayest thou?"

"Ay" answered the huntsman; "he shot well that day when he sent an arrow through the head of poor Ha——" Here the soldier stopped, for he thought suddenly it was a bad omen.

"Why stoppest thou man? Dost think I fear hobgoblins? Harold—thou wouldst say."

"The stag, I was going to say sire."

"Nay then, but a better stag stands now at bay; let him shoot till he be tired—and here are our horns to butt withal." Saying this, he threw up his battle-axe high in the air, whirling like a wheel, and caught it by the handle as it fell. The chiefs who stood round admired the warlike dexterity of their king, but thought the Norman duke's shot was an ill omen, and Harold recalled the apparition of the Vala.

"'Tis strange that such things should dwell and fix upon the mind," thought he; "I hold that apparition cheap as an idle dream; yet idle and senseless as it is, were I to make it known 'twould possibly turn the fate of the coming battle: every bow in the enemy's army would be bent against me. I should be soon struck by an arrow; then my Saxons would think the day lost and fly: so do these vain prophecies accomplish their own predictions. The God of Editha decides all things; that He may protect her is all I care about. I can bear my fate. I will fight battle after battle, as long as I can get the Saxons to defend their

Digitized by Google

country. When they will fight no more, I will rouse the Irish to arms, and if they fail me, then let William take my crown and life together!"

As these reflections passed in the mind of Harold, an embassy arrived from the duke of Normandy. The message was brought by a monk of Fescamp, named Hugh Mairgot; a shrewd and resolute priest, who, though he did not think miracles would be performed in England, hoped to get a fish and a loaf in the scramble.

"Sire," quoth the shaveling, bowing in lowly guise to Harold, and assuming that humility which in churchmen is often a prelude to insolence; "I am sent by Duke William to present myself to you with four propositions:—First, that you keep to the oath you have taken upon the most holy relics, and repair the wrong you have done; giving up the crown which was awarded to the duke of Normandy by the late King Edward. Secondly, that you hold the crown as a fief of the duke of Normandy; doing homage and paying tribute for the same, in which case he will retire with his whole army to his dukedom. Thirdly, let the dispute be submitted to the decision of the Pope. Fourthly, if you reject these three modes of settling the dispute, the duke challenges you to single combat, thus sparing the blood of our soldiers."

Harold looked sternly at the monk for an instant.

"Tell Duke William," he said, "that God alone can decide between us."

The monk would have replied, but the wrath of the king arose at this insolence; grasping his axe, he would have caused the earthly avocations of the priest to close on the spot, had not Gurth seen the rising anger, and seizing the terrified monk by the arm, cast him forth, saying,—

"Get thee hence as thou valuest thy life, and give Duke William the answer thou art charged with."

Harold then called to him a Saxon knight well versed in the Norman language, which thou well knowest is more Scandinavian than French.

"Brave Hugo de Port, thy good manors of Cerdeford and Eschetune are at stake as well as my crown, in this same quarrel with the duke of Normandy; and there is no earl-

Digitized by Google

dorman in this army more valued for his wisdom, courage, and Saxon blood than thyself. Hie thee therefore to Duke William, with whom and whose companions thy long sojourn in Normandy under the good King Edward, has made thee well acquainted; tell him to depart with his force or fight, and use such gentle words as thy courtesy and subtle wit shall prompt. Speak as a king, and let thy words be my words."

The thane instantly mounted his war-horse, and attended by a small train, his battle-axe and shield slung upon his back, he rode towards the Norman camp. Being quickly brought into the presence of the duke, he said—

"Sire, my master, the king of England greets you. Seek not to hold him to the observance of an oath which he made before yourself and that most reverend prelate, who now stands armed at your side. That oath was forced from him as a captive, and by the laws of God, and of our holy church, he being now free is absolved from all observance. Retire into your own country in peace, and if you will so do, the king my master will repair your ships, and give you every assistance to embark; but if you refuse, and are bold enough to abide the result, then Harold defies you to battle."

"Noble Hugo, return to thy master and tell him that William will meet him in open fight, army to army; and if he wishes to fight hand to hand I shall be easily distinguished in the battle. For thyself, noble Hugo, accept from me, thine old friend, a noble white courser of Andalusia; his brilliant whiteness and beauty will, if thou ridest him in the fight, draw upon thee many a lance, for all will seek to capture such a steed; he is well known in the Norman army as being of high mettle and a generous temper, patient of fatigue but agile in fight, and light as a gossamer, while his broad chest and short back evince his strength. Accept him good Hugo, and with him this rich robe of Eastern manufacture."

The Saxon thane bowed in token of acceptance, and mounting his Spanish charger, departed.

In the mean time Harold, seeing that a battle was inevitable, proposed to Editha to retire to London.

Digitized by Google

"Editha, 'tis not meet that you remain longer in the camp; we shall be attacked to-morrow; get thee hence, beloved of my heart, and await the tidings of our victory in London. Go, dearly beloved, go!" He pressed her fondly to his iron-clad breast.

"What, leave thee Harold?" and as she spoke she clung closely round his neck; "leave thee now! No! Come victory or defeat, life or death, Editha will be at thy side: send me not hence Harold; I will not leave thee."

"But thou canst not remain in the camp; the Norman arrows will reach us in showers, even their darts and slings will pour death upon us; the battle itself may rage within the precincts of the camp. My Editha, thou canst not abide—indeed thou must depart within the hour, thou art not safe here."

"Then let me go to Waltham Abbey; it was founded by you, and there I shall feel as if God and you protected me. There are many monks here sent by the abbot to administer extreme unction to the dying: I will take two with me; it is not far from hence, and I shall have tidings of the battle every hour, for I will leave pages on the nearest hill to bring me word how the day goes. I and all my train will remain as near the field as we can with safety; we may stop at least a mile or two on this side of the convent; may we not, my Harold?" The coaxing, persuading, eager way in which the queen said this, made the hero smile.

"O Editha, I doubt thee much! thou wilt, I fear, remain too near the field; but have it as thou wilt; remain a mile on this side of Waltham: let my friends the monks be with thee, and pray for me, my Editha—the prayers of one so good are surely heard. And when a day shall pass thou wilt meet thy victorious husband riding from the fight to clasp his beloved wife. Go my Editha, and be cheerful, for joy awaits thee; but keep aloof from danger; forget not that thou art queen, and that thy capture would be ruin to thy people, and worse than death to me. Adieu! I must not accompany thee on thy road, for I dare not quit the camp an instant; I must even now go forth and watch the enemy. Adieu, adieu, excellent matchless Editha!" Saying

Digitized by Google

this they embraced, with those dread emotions which agitate the breast, when love, and hopes, and fears, are mixed in one fierce pang of separation.

She mounted her palfrey, and attended by a strong guard of Londoners, departed for the monastery of Waltham. Harold stood at his tent door with his eyes fixed upon her until she crossed the neighbouring hill and passed from his sight for ever!

No sooner had Editha crossed the heights which concealed the camp from her view, than she stopped her escort at a farm-house, and made the commander draw them up on an open green.

"Friends, what country are ye of?"

"Saxons!"

"All?"

"All!"

"Then as Saxons I will speak to ye: that the battle will be fought to-morrow is certain as the coming day; and think ye, brave warriors, that your queen will keep one Saxon battle-axe idle to guard her person when the fate of Harold, his crown, and the Saxon people are fought for on the bloody field? Never will a pure and noble Saxon maid be wanting, fit to bear the crown of this glorious land. If Editha were dead, there are thousands, all noble, chaste, and beautiful. But ye have but one hero able to encounter Duke William in war. The Saxons are all warriors of great strength and courage in battle, yet none can compare with Harold as leader of an army. Now hear the commands of your queen. The sun has set, return to the camp; you will not be seen by the king, to whom I would not cause uneasiness; return, and swear to me that you will follow Harold through the combat—to guard him is to guard me! I and my women will pray for ye all; and you dames," continued the queen, turning towards her attendants, "is there one among ye so base as to wish him ye best love out of the battle?"

"None!" answered the Saxon dames with one voice.

"I knew it. Go brave guards, and if ye meet a craven-hearted Saxon tell him that the Normans are less dangerous

Digitized by Google

to meet than the Saxon women. All we love are in the fight, and we will work woe to him that flies."

"God bless you noble queen!" exclaimed several of the men; "we were ashamed to come away, but no man dared face the king's displeasure by refusing."

"False! false! ye caitiffs," cried Winifred. "My good man Elstan told the king that he would die for the Lady Editha, but would not run away from the Normans for all the women in England."

"If my husband, Canute, came here I would take his helmet and battle-axe from him, and giving him my cap and distaff go back to Hastings," cried Rose, laughing. "If the queen would let me, I would go back now, and fight by the side of Canute."

"There spoke a true Saxon spirit," said Editha; "but patience my brave dame, we will not be far from our husbands. Were it not the king's will that I should leave the camp I would follow him through the field: but 'tis time that ye return men. Call the good ceorl that owns this farm to me."

"My son is gone to the camp, dear lady," said an old woman, "and his wife with him. She took her milk-pails across her shoulders, that she might give drink to those that fought."

"Brave dame—I honour her."

"She put on her father's helmet and shirt of mail, and girded his seax by her side," added the boy who stood by.

"And where is her father?"

"He was slain by Count Eustace at Dover, and she vowed to the Virgin that she will have the blood of a Norman before she returns. If she meets Eustace of Boulogne 'twere safer for him to meet many a man in the Saxon army, for few are stronger than Gunilda, and none more firm."

"Come then good dame, furnish these armed men with mead and bread, and I will lodge at thy house with my women."

The men, being supplied, departed for the camp. Editha called the old woman and the lad to her chamber.

"Wouldst thou be afraid my young lad to attend upon me to the neighbourhood of the battle to-morrow?"

Digitized by Google

"No!" answered the boy: "I wanted to go with my father to fight with the Normans. I can cast a stone with any chap in the place."

"And why would not thy father let thee?"

"'Twas my mother that hindered me," replied the youth. "She said I must stay to revenge our blood upon the Normans if they won the day."

"She was right boy; thou art too young yet to do battle with grown men; but thou shalt be my page, and attend upon me."

"I am only ten years old, and cannot defend you as a man could, but I will try."

"Dost know the country about?"

"Yes! I know every by-lane within ten miles."

"Then be ready to follow me before daybreak."

Editha sent for two monks of Waltham whom she had brought with her.

"My friends I know your faith to Harold and myself. I will send my people on to Waltham, but we will go at daylight and watch the battle. Will ye attend me?"

"Even unto death lady: it grieved my brother Dunstan and myself to come away, but Harold's orders must be obeyed. We will not quit thee, but will joyfully accompany thee to watch the battle."

"Then let us all to prayers," said Editha; and so she spent the night.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER LIII.

While Editha thinks it is very hard
To keep in rear with a soldier's guard,
Harold ranges his troops in line,
And finds them very stout and fine;
But the Vala comes, alas the while!
To urge on him her magic guile;
She prophesies evil to Harold apart,
Yet cannot shake his manly heart.

HAROLD, having failed in an attempt to surprise the Normans by a sudden march, had drawn up his army on a sharp ridge, along the crest of which his hundred thousand Saxons stood arrayed for battle.

On the right were men of Salisbury, rude cultivators, armed with clubs and spears. Then came warlike Gloucester, strong to wield the seax and lance. Next, from woody Winchester, stood thousands whirling the heavy battle-axe. Near the centre the hardy Welshmen, active in war, were ranged. Near the king's standard stood the well disciplined bands from London, under their leaders. Bright armour, richly inlaid with gold, distinguished ethel-born from ceorl.

In the centre, Harold's guards, ten thousand, who had followed him in all his wars, were armed alike, with huge double-edged battle-axes; their arms and armour were in excellent order, not bright, but with all straps and buckles new and well fitted. They were in the prime of life; evenly sized, and large of limb. Grim and weather-beaten were their visages, and stern their aspect; for they knew war and all its turns and dangers, and blenched not to meet them all. With keen experienced eyes they watched the Norman movements. Now and then their smiles expressed pity for the confusion of the younger soldiers; but silent and almost motionless they remained, amidst the noise and ribaldry of the rest. Yet would a joke at times pass, designed for Harold's ears when he came near them. To

Digitized by Google

him alone they looked: he might speak with a voice of thunder to the rest, and be unheard in the turmoil; but a whisper would have moved his guards.

On the left of this veteran band were the strong unconquerable men of Kent, little inferior to the guards in discipline, and devoted to the house of Godwin. Rich armour, and a variety of weapons, distinguished them and the Londoners from the rest of the Saxons. Joyous and bold, they jeered at the Normans and followed Harold as their own feudal chief rather than as king: for their own peculiar laws and customs they were to fight, and to him only who respected those things would they submit.

Stretching beyond the Kentish warriors were the tall and handsome men of Lancashire, fierce and free; and on the extreme left were the gaunt powerful giants of Yorkshire and Northumberland, terrible in fight, and enthusiastic for Harold, who had twice saved them from Tostig, and led them to victory at Stamford Bridge.

In his wild host were heard the shrill pipes, and nakers and trumpets, and rude music. The banner of the Saxon king—a warrior armed for combat, worked in gold by the hands of Editha—waved in the centre: it had waved o'er Stamford Bridge victoriously, and now gave a presage to the Saxons, for he who led it then led it now! But how different was the enemy, good Robert Wace. King Hardraada left his defensive armour in his ships, that his army might be light and active to plunder; he was caught in the midst of his error and punished by the rapid Harold; but Harold could not so catch Duke William, who took all fortune gave, but never trusted her. From London Harold had hoped to surprise us at Hastings; he found the Norman army ready to receive him. Now his banner was high and conspicuous, and before it stood the Saxon monarch himself; nor was the grandson of the great Canute unworthy of his high lineage and his station. Lofty in stature, commanding in mien, matchless in his nation as a warrior and politician, his people paid homage to him as a man and a king! He was the king of their choice, and they resolved to stand by him in fight. He leaned upon his axe as he contemplated the position of the Normans. His dress and arms were

Digitized by Google

plain, and like those of his veterans, from whom he was only distinguished by his size, the beauty of his person, and his richly inlaid battle-axe, which was larger than ordinary men could wield. A small crown of gold ornamented his helmet, and his loins were girded with a belt, from which hung a short seax.

"Let our cavalry send their horses to the rear," said the king: "I will maintain the combat on foot, I will not descend from the height: our battle shall be defensive. When the Normans attack, let them be repulsed; but let none follow their defeated troops down the hill. Let a deep ditch be dug all round the camp, and hurdles set up to protect us from the Norman arrows, for their archers are good, and our men ill furnished with defensive armour; nor have we bowmen to encounter them, they would approach securely, and destroy our soldiers at their pleasure."

These orders Harold gave two days previous to the action; and as he finished, a murmuring sound arose far in the rear of the camp, and attracted the attention of all.

"Good thanes, what is that?" asked the king.

"It is not the ordinary noise of the camp," answered Earl Morcar.

"The people collect there far in the rear towards the woods," observed a powerful Saxon eorlderman, named Osulph.

"Behold, a large force issues from the woods," cried Ailwin, the Childe of Kent.

"Even the Vala, by the head of Mimer!" exclaimed Harold.

And "The Vala! the Vala!" resounded through the field. Harold advanced to meet her: she was riding upon a palfrey, Vafthrudner and Gangrader leading the reins in surly state; she was dressed in the same costume as when she appeared at Bodiam, but her long grizzly locks hung loose and dishevelled over her shoulders. She led a body of five thousand men of Sussex, all armed with axes and shields.

"These, O noble Cyning," said the Vala, pointing with her wand to the band that followed her—"these are five

Digitized by Google

thousand men armed from the treasury of the Vala, and true Saxons every man."

"Oh, thou wilt also foretell the fate of battle to us great prophetess!" cried many voices, for by that time the host had collected in one great mass around her and the king.

"Yes" answered she, in the peculiar shrill tone she spoke when wishing to be heard by those far off, "I can prophesy upon what the fate of battle hangs, an ye will listen to the Vala."

"Upon what—upon what?" resounded from all parts of the multitude.

"Upon this!" shrieked the Vala, loudly and long continuing to pronounce the word, as, snatching a battle-axe from a soldier who stood near, she held it high in the air, which was instantly filled with loud hurrahs. Vafthrudner and Gangrader, not understanding the tremendous shout, growled deeply and wrathfully; but luckily, being unable to fix their dangerous anger upon any particular person, it soon subsided.

"Glorious woman!" said the king to Frica, "in all the vast multitude around there is no heart more true to England and myself than thou art; remain in our camp till the battle, animate all with thy own brave spirit; and when the Normans come on, then follow the queen, and ye shall both quickly hear that Harold and his army have earned a saga."

When the king entered his tent he sent for the Vala.

"We are alone, Frica; I pray thee, in the name of Odin, to foretell good success to us through the ranks, for though we are by some thousands more numerous than the Normans, yet are they better practised in war than our Saxons, and are far better armed and disciplined. Our numbers and our courage must do all, and for this reason I have fortified my position and will not descend into the plains."

"I will do all that a Vala can do, Cyning, to save thee and thy people and my people. I will forfeit my truth, my fame, my honour, my blood,—in a word, I will be false as Muspelheim for thy sake. But listen brave Harold—thine hour and mine are come. I have wearied the spirits and exhausted magic; all points to the fixed doom of thee and

Digitized by Google

me. This is the twelfth day of September, on the fourteenth we both fall in battle." Here her two dogs sent forth a deep moan as they slept at her feet. "Ay, moan ye! moan ye! for ye too, poor brutes, are doomed! Nor ye nor Frica will ever enter the tower of the Vala more: the raven shall tear our rotting flesh, the owl shall screech as he flies circling over our carcasses. But the Saxon people shall be worse off than we: the Norman leopard will rend and tear them living, yet neither thou nor I shall see it, Harold." The Vala laid her hands upon his shoulders, and looking him full in the face, said, "Thou shalt be in Asgaard!"

Harold smiled: "Well, well, there are worse places," he said; "I shall find Hengist and Horsa, and Canute, and many a brave warrior there."

"Oh, I know Harold thou hast no fear to die! Editha is doomed to a worse fate. Ha! Harold thou growest pale man—but listen."

"Nay Vala, by the mace of Woden I will not listen to thee; thou wilt unman me if thou speakest of evil to Editha." The Vala was silent, yet still looked in the face of Harold, whose robust frame shook with agitation.

"Yet tell me is there aught that I can do, which is left undone, to protect Editha?"

"Nothing."

"Then dear Frica, the will of God, of Editha's God and mine, and thine, be done."

"Believest thou in her God?" asked the Vala.

"Yea, even as I believe not in Odin."

"Then why does he not save the Saxons?"

"Why does not Odin?"

"Thou hast studied the Christian faith, Harold?"

"Yea Frica, Editha has taught me its doctrines."

"And thou believest?"

"I have said so; I believe it, because Christ preached good to man and peace on earth, while the Scandinavian gods teach war and reward evil. If the Normans were Christians, they would not invade us; yet in Odin's eyes it is not evil but good to invade, and, as you foretell, to destroy us!"

"I have of late had reason to doubt many of my predic-

Digitized by Google

dictions," answered Frica; "but it is now too late to change."

"No, not so," said Harold; "our Saviour has promised heaven to man and woman who believe; hast thou not seen how fixed and resolute Editha is in danger?"

"Yea in truth, that sweet lady has been bold in danger, when the heart of Frica almost failed her; 'twas strange, and even now she seems rather to act for the Saxons than for herself."

"Then learn to believe Frica; faith will teach thee to bear wrong; 'twill not support thee to do wrong."

"But if so, I must not foretell victory to the soldiers, when I know we shall be defeated."

"Prophesy neither! call upon the army to trust in the cross, and fight bravely for their country; the troops believe that thou art inspired and knowest the future; tell them, as thou didst this morning, that victory awaits the brave. Thy Scandinavian gods make thee false; if thou promisest victory thou liest, for thy gods have told thee we shall be defeated. If thou prophesiest defeat, thou wilt insure it and ruin thy country! Thy gods are false gods, and seduce thee to do evil; but if as a Christian thou callest upon the Saxons to fight for their country, and protect their families from slavery, if thou callest upon them to trust in God and do their duty, then art thou a true patriot and God will reward thee."

"Even as thou sayest will Frica do; what Harold and Editha believe Frica believes, and in thy faith she dies."

The dogs now awoke and came to Frica, licking her hands playfully; Gangrader, who had been smelling about the tent, came up wagging his tail with something in his mouth. The Vala took it from him—'twas Editha's crucifix!

"I accept the faith!" cried Frica; "'tis the will of God, he has himself converted me!"

"Take the crucifix and keep it excellent Vala; to thee only would I give aught that belongs to Editha." Harold kissed the ivory cross, and hung it round the neck of the Vala, who went forth and told all that had happened, which greatly exalted the troops, for it was said that God had converted the Vala to the Christian faith by a miracle, had

Digitized by Google

thereby taken the army under his special protection, and therefore in the great battle their cry was, "The rood, the rood!—the holy rood!"

CHAPTER LIV.

Agamenon ni les grezeis,
Ne bien plus de cinquante reis,
Ne portent Troie en dix ans prendre;
Unques n'i sorent tant entendre.
E icis Dux, o ses Normanz,
E od ses autres buens aidanz,
Conquist un réaume plenier
E un grant pople fort é fier,
Qui fu merveille estrange é grand,
Sol entre prime é la nuitant.

William spreads wide his warlike wings,
Horses neigh, and armour rings;
Taillefer raises the olden song,
Of Oliver brave and Roland strong;
He tosses his beaming blade on high,
And charges home with his battle-cry;
Yet Taillefer in battle must die—
The battle where Harold 'gainst William stood,
The Saxons fighting knee-deep in blood,
Until the Norman arrow flies,
And low on earth great Harold lies,
Then England is Duke William's prize.

I WILL now turn to the Norman camp good Maistre Wace, of which camp I can speak with more correctness, than I could of Harold's. The day before the action, William mounted a small eminence, from which for a long time he contemplated the position of the English army. On each flank, and in rear, it was protected by a thick forest, through which cavalry could not charge, and of cavalry

Digitized by Google

three-fourths of the army consisted. The Norman archers, too, would be useless among the trees; for although amidst woods bowmen range with profit and grand divertisement in peace, 'tis not the same in war, because through the thick foliage of trees and their low branches, flights of arrows cannot find their way. Now Duke William's bowmen were of great advantage, seeing that King Harold had none to oppose them. The duke, therefore, resolved to attack the enemy in front. Having formed his resolution, and as the evening began to close in, he returned to his tent.

"Sirs," said he, "at dawn to-morrow we will do battle with Harold; see that your armour be in order, your buckles good, and your weapons sharp, take food and rest that ye may be strong for the conflict; but let us to vespers, that we may pray for success against the perjured Harold, and let the blood that will be spilt to-morrow be on his soul!"

The bishops of Bayeux and Coutances ordered the priests to spend the night in prayer and in confessing sinners; and thousands of men prepared themselves for taking their final leave of this world in the morrow's battle. Many were seen in the dusk, walking to and fro alone and thoughtful of those far away; others ruminated on the chances of this world; for though they had none to leave behind they much grieved to part with—what was to come? They now thought, they now moved, they were now alive; in a few hours where might they be? A puzzling question. Was it right to do the deeds they were preparing for—was it right to invade the Saxons, who had done them no wrong—was it not fearful to die in the act of murder, preparatory to robbery? Heaven knows! 'twas too late then to study casuistry. Others again thought of the glory of the coming battle. "Live or die, no matter," thought they, "we take our glorious chance with William and with Harold. It is a thousand times better to fall in fight than to linger under the inflictions of some leech, who drugs the man to death with his nostrums. What is a tedious monotonous life compared to a glorious death in battle! Death comes but once, and in God's name be it now with thousands of

Digitized by Google

brave comrades and under such a leader! Would to Heaven 'twere daylight that we might begin! Curse on the lingering hours of night! Oh, the very thoughts of this battle are worth years and years of dull life; and then, if we survive, glory and riches abide the conquerors."

Such were the thoughts that agitated the soldiers of Duke William. Those of King Harold rejoiced with light hearts; their work was hallowed; they fought the battle of self-defence—they fought for all that was dear to men, and were conscious of a just and sacred cause: therefore did they pass the night in rejoicing. But the invaders had an evil deed to do, and they sought by prayers to blind their consciences to deeds of destruction. For my part, Maistre Wace, I would willingly have been a Saxon, but I was a sworn vassal to the duke of Normandy, and my honour was at stake; besides, gentle youth, I loved the noise of battle, so I even got a priest to confess me, and then I laid me down to sleep with a clear conscience. When the next night came, I had the blood of twenty Saxons upon my conscience. But then I slew sixteen of them while defending Normans who were over-matched with numbers; so I counted the killing of those worthy gentlemen to be a righteous deed of neighbourly affection: three of the other four attacked me first, they were slain in self-defence, which is the duty of a Christian man; the last was a huge Saxon who was doing a world of mischief with his axe. I smote him down after a long struggle, for he was a gaunt youth; but he deserved it, for he had slain many Normans, and at one time nearly turned the fight against us: besides, I have caused many masses to be said for his soul.

There the old knight remained silent for a while, and then turning to the clerk with an animated face, he added exultingly:—

The blow that felled the warrior was worth ten golden bezants! I hit him as David hit Goliah, only with my iron mace instead of a pebble, and he fell. 'Tis said, he boasted that no Norman or Saxon could stand against him, not even Duke William; but Harold threw him wrestling, and I killed him! That great axe in the armoury was his; he was as big as Duke William, and he struck hard and split my shield

Digitized by Google

as if it were paper. I closed with him and cast him to the ground: we fell together, but I rose more nimbly, and as he raised his hatchet with both hands to cleave me to the chine, I struck him 'twixt the eyes a blow that sufficed. In those days 'twas no light matter to meet William Mallet in fight! But they are gone! Look at this miserable arm now, the arm that felled that Saxon giant! So we pass away—well! well!

The glorious fourteenth of October came. Before day broke, Duke William arose, and after a slight repast, sent for the bishop and communicated: then he ordered his armour to be brought, and we all stood round while he donned it. The squire who waited upon him presented him his shirt of mail the back part in front; many thought this a bad omen, and his people showed signs of alarm: the duke smiled.

"This is lucky" said he; "it foretells that my dukedom is to be turned into a kingdom! the duke's mail won't fit the king's body!" Then looking gravely around, "Sirs," he added, "I never believed in magic nor in divinations, nor in omens; but have ever put my trust in God."

These words, and the solemn manner in which they were spoken, greatly inspired all who heard them. He then issued forth, armed in complete and gorgeous panoply, ordering the army to take their weapons.

The day now dawned, but men could yet scarcely distinguish objects: a great sound of trumpets and other music burst with a warlike clang upon the ear from all parts of the camp, and William ascended the mound from which he had the evening before contemplated the enemy, and about this mound our army was formed in dense order. His Spanish horse, a noble animal, given to him by the king of Spain, richly accoutred was behind, and pawed the ground as if impatient of its coming fate; for three horses were slain in the fight at Hastings under that intrepid champion. Around were all those who formed the chief's personal retinue, but his own great stature and the rising part of the mount on which he had placed himself, rendered him conspicuous to the whole host; he looked like a mighty giant, and the mist of the morn seemed to magnify his size.

Digitized by Google

"Soldiers!" cried he, with a loud voice of command; "this day show the strength of your arms and the courage of your hearts! Honour and riches attend upon victory. Slavery and death from a merciless enemy await defeat. The sea is behind, retreat impossible: the enemy's fleet is at sea. Be daring and victory will be yours. I will hang round my neck the holy relics upon which the perjured Harold took his oath: God will give us strength and courage to punish the wickedness of the Saxon chief and his people—those murderers who not long since massacred the Danes. Heaven has delivered them into your hands to punish; let us go forth then, and put all to the sword!" As he said this, he hung the relics over his armour, and then mounted his charger.

When the soldiers saw him, high towering upon his huge horse, they gave a general shout; he seemed a host in himself, and at that instant the sun rose, and its first beams striking upon the polished helmet of the colossal warrior seemed to give him a radiant crown.

"He is crowned! he is crowned! All hail king of England!" burst from a thousand voices, whose shout ascended to the skies.

"Now reverend fathers," said he to Odo, bishop of Bayeux, and Geoffry de Montbray, bishop of Coutances, "say mass." The prelate of Bayeux was in complete armour, carrying a heavy club: but Montbray, unarmed, bore a crucifix. The mass was said, an anthem sung, and loud the orisons of the warriors rose to heaven: they prayed for victory over their enemies—over those whose land they came to seize, whose lives they came to destroy, whose women they came to dishonour, whose children they came to enslave! They came to render desolate an unoffending people, and they prayed the Almighty God for aid in the destruction of those he had created. God said, "Thou shalt not kill," and yet the bishops animated the host to battle! They unfurled the standard of religion and raised the crucifix on high, as if to say, "Behold Him who died to teach ye peace! Strike home! Let blood flow, and rapine stalk through the land! Do the work of hell; again crucify the Son of man; but have faith in the Church, faith in us, and all will be forgiven thee!" As the Pope's banner was raised, Odo

Digitized by Google

gave his breviary to his attendants and retook the weapons. The prelate was a fine man, large of limb and of great prowess in combat.

Duke William now drew up his army, which he formed in three lines.

The first was composed of his bowmen and slingers, with machines for casting stones. This line was commanded by William Fitzosborne and Roger Montgomery, and in it stood the Angevins, Bretons, Manseaux, Pescherons, with the bands of two valiant captains, Aymere and Fergant.

The second line, formed of the heavy-armed infantry, was led by Eustace of Boulogne: here fought the Poitevins, the Boulonnois, and Allemans.

The third line was commanded by the great duke himself: it consisted wholly of cavalry, and there fought all the Normans.

He drew it up in three divisions.

The first had orders to support the right wings of the two first lines.

The second to support the left wing.

The third, at the head of which he placed himself, supported the centre, and was ready to give aid wherever the battle pressed. This third line, being all of cavalry, and more numerous than the first and second lines, outflanked them.

The morning air was chill, the sun still low upon the horizon, vapours hung upon the ground, and the distant wings melted in the mist of the dawn. On the heights, now gilded by the rising orb of day, the air was more clear; the Saxon arms on the most prominent points glittered in the sunbeams, while those more retired were partially shadowed by the steamy vapours of the night still clinging to the hill. The surrounding woods, dropping dew and rich in their autumnal hues, added their broad masses of light and shade to the various scenes, calm spectators of the great tragedy then preparing. Daring courage, quailing cowardice, honour and shame, the thirst of glory and the dread to die; high hopes, base fears, love, avarice, vengeance, and all the passions which agitate the soul of mortal man, there ran riot. One hundred and sixty thousand men, all desperate to destroy!

Digitized by Google

Merciful God! thou who from thy eternal throne castest down thy glance upon such deeds, against thy high behests; say how is this, that we so dare to disobey thee, and in the height and fervour of our impiety call upon thee as we strike, and in thy name slay him thou hast commanded us to cherish and to love? Boy! boy! it was the work of hell, and these our orisons were a mockery! But yet the scene was beautiful, and the sight glorious when the fogs brushed away, and the resplendent sun blazed out in all his majesty. Both hosts then stood marshalled to the sight, and on the impulse of the moment wild ferocious howls of defiance arose from each army, mingling in the shaken air, and echoing in the wood for a time before they died away.

Harold looked down upon the host below with a calm, collected, and unshaken fortitude, confident in his soldiers and in himself.

William's heart swelled with exultation as he beheld the high-wrought discipline and bearing of his chivalry: the strong position of Harold was indeed startling; but the Norman leader had never known defeat, and suddenly, animated by his own high recollections, he cried aloud:—

"Warriors of the Val de Dunes, of Hambrières, of Varaville, follow your victorious general!" then waving his heavy mace high in the air, he turned his horse towards the Saxon army.

"Val de Dunes," "Hambrières," and "Varaville," resounded responsive through the advancing battalions of Normandy.

"Raoul de Tony, grand gonfalonier of Normandy, bear thou through this battle the holy standard of the Pope," cried William.

"By the mass no, sire! for such a charge would prevent my fighting, and I mean so to deal my blows upon thine enemies this day, that neither thou nor they shall ever forget it."

"Then bear it thou Walter Giffard," said the duke to the count of Longueville.

"Sire, I mean to do no less than that good knight, the grand gonfalonier. I bear nothing this blessed day but my armour, my lance, and your glory."

"Sire," cried the brave Toustan le Blanc, seigneur of Bec-

Digitized by Google

Crespin, "give me the standard, and by the sword of my father I'll plant it on yon hill ere night, or Toustan sees not sun set."

"And the land on which thou plantest it shall be thine: largesse, brave sir," answered William.

"I have thy promise to begin the fight sire," said Taillefer, as he rode up to the duke.

"Gallant Taillefer, no man in this good army has a better claim upon William for this honour. Go! and let thy sword bite as it is wont to do, for all time shall ring with the fame of this great day."

Taillefer rode forth in front of the army, caracoling with his strong Norman horse and singing aloud the song of Roland and Oliver, and the fight of Ronscevalles: his fine voice, loud and clear, rung forth the animating strains so that both armies heard him, and the bold champion as he sung, threw his sword aloft high whirling in the air. He challenged the best Saxon knight to single combat, and down came a mounted opponent at the call, though few had horses: he rode firmly from the hill and charged upon the plain; their weapons clashed loudly, and the cloven skull of the tall Northumbrian told the prowess of Taillefer. Another and another came, but they too fell beneath the deadly blows of the minstrel-warrior. Furious at the shame, forth strode a sturdy man of Kent on foot: he approached the active Norseman, who rushed on elate with victory and animated by the cheers of the army, but no sooner was he within reach of the Saxon than one blow from the upraised battle-axe felled the champion to the ground, and Taillefer was no more! The victor sprung upon the horse and kissing his hand to the enemy rode back into his line: a groan followed the fall of Taillefer, but the invaders came on, and flights of arrows sprung from the Norman bows, whizzing through the air with hurtling sound, and winged by death.

"To your cover!" cried Harold. "Let no man quit the hill—each maintain his ground."

The word passed through the English line, it stepped back under shelter of the high hurdles which, placed above the heads of the soldiers, received the arrows showered by the enemy, whose first line now mounted the hill covered by the

Digitized by Google

bowmen. The assault was fierce, the resistance firm; the arrows, barred by the hurdles, fell harmless, and the two first lines, broken to pieces against the strong rampart, fled. The moment was critical; the duke gave the word for his third line to charge, and then that grand chivalry advanced—a wall of moving iron. The earth shook, the air resounded with their cries, and as the huge curling wave leaps at the rocky shore, so the Normans sprung fiercely at the foe.

At that moment the Vala passed rapidly along their front like a wild meteor, her grey dishevelled hair and strange habiliments streaming in the wind; her look was fierce and supernatural as she held aloft the crucifix, and screamed with her unearthly voice, "The rood! the rood! the holy rood!" the word ran like wildfire through the host, a hundred thousand men yelled forth that war-cry, and "The rood! the rood! the holy rood!" responded to "*Dex aie!*" and "*Notre Dame!*" The fracas of arms and armour joined in the crashing uproar, and the war-horse of William bore him headlong up the rampart, bursting through the hedge of axes that bristled on the summit. We reached the Saxon standard. Harold leaping upon the duke slew his steed; and again that trenchant axe gleamed high above the prostrate horse-encumbered hero, when a swarm of interposed bucklers barred the falling death. On! on! was the cry, yet no courage could force that rampart of strong shields, sharp weapons, and staunch soldiers crowning the ridge. We were repulsed, and went rolling down the height, friend and foe, dead and living, in one confused mass.

Harold's voice was heard above the mighty din:—

"Keep the heights Saxons, keep the heights; the victory is our own." The word was repeated by thousands, and the outcry spread far and wide along the Saxon line. But the Bretons and men of Boulogne assailing their left, now fled in disorder, and the bands of Salisbury and Gloucester, bold but inexperienced, disobeyed the orders of their king: seeing the flight of the gendarmes they dashed down the hill in hot pursuit, and struck reckless into the plains.

William beheld the rout of his right wing, his centre and left repulsed, and a disastrous cry was running through the

Digitized by Google

field that the duke was slain. The crisis of the battle had arrived, and all hung upon his own great spirit.

A momentary calm succeeded to this convulsive pang of battle, the fight relaxed. Then the genius of the duke, towering above disasters, turned the day. He ordered his army again to attack, but after a while to feign a flight. The stratagem succeeded; the Saxons thinking the Normans were routed raised a general shout, and dashed down into the plain beneath, charging the fugitives.

Harold, at the head of his guards, alone remained firm. In vain he despatched orders to restrain the folly, and prevent the disobedience of his rash troops; their rush had been too sudden and impetuous; they went like an avalanche descending a mountain's side. But no sooner had they reached the plain than the pretended fugitives rallied to the cries of Harcourt, Annesly, Longueville, Mowbray, Falconer, Aumerle and Arundel, Warren and Vernon, and a hundred other leaders crying "To the rescue, ho!" They formed upon banner, and pennon, and pennoncel; and to the clangour of trumpets and loud shouts, fifty thousand disciplined warriors dashed, with an awful uproar, upon the disordered Saxons!

Harold saw the ruin. "Stand firm!" cried he to his guards; "the rush up the hill will come anon, and we may save these madmen yet!"

"Ye heroes of Asgaard, how they fight!" added he, looking down upon the conflict. "O God! O God! what madness drew them from the hill," uttering this exclamation, he dashed his battle-axe on the ground, as one beside himself with the agony of his feelings.

"Gurth guard the heights; I will go down and try to save the maniacs."

"No no sire! stay thou upon the hill or all will be lost; let me go." Saying this the brave Gurth rushed down, followed by his bold brother Sweyne.

Then fierce and wild raged the encounter below, man and horse rolled over man and horse clouds of dust enveloped the battling hosts and through its powdery veil coruscations of light glanced from armour and arms, gleam-

Digitized by Google

ing and sparkling in the confused masses. The disciplined Norman cavalry pressed the disordered Saxons, till compressed by danger they closed, and shoulder to shoulder formed a barrier of shields against the charging cavalry: thus the remains of the native army at last regained the hill—but Gurth and Sweyne had fallen.

"The height! the height! Now Normans, now or never, follow your duke!" shouted William, elated and conscious of his advantage. We had then fought eight hours without intermission, yet the cry of the duke thrilled through the breasts of his chivalry, overpowering all feelings of fatigue, and with responding cheers his warriors once more, a serried line of steel, dashed up the slope. Duke William led, but gained not that part of the height where Harold fought, and under one blow of whose destroying battle-axe riders and steeds often fell together! He drove our Normans before him: it was death to encounter the terrible warrior —that day he had no rival but Duke William.

Having repulsed the attack in his front, and seeing that part of the height gained where the duke fought, Harold called to his guards to follow him, and rushed upon us. Then "*Notre Dame! Dex aie!*" again rung with loud defiance, answered by "The rood! the rood! the holy rood!" Again the pitch of the stormy battle arose in all its fury; but the duke and Odo tore down the hurdles as they fought, while with their long sharp swords their followers cut the lashings making a wide breach, through which the assailants entered in thousands. The Saxons made desperate resistance, and when their rampart was beaten down closed shield to shield, presenting a barrier which no effort could force, and from behind which their heavy long-handled battle-axes and stubborn spears struck with resistless force. Not a foot could William gain upon his valorous enemies, and the combat, though far stretching right and left, hung upon the sharp crest of that bloody height.

Thickly and desperately did the invaders push up for footing on the table-land, and hundreds of self-devoted Saxons, closing with their enemies, flung themselves headlong with their foes in mortal struggle down the steep. There were seen dying men hurling their weapons madly as they

Digitized by Google

lay, and expiring with the effort; and the wounded, resting upon their shields, yet still striking feebly at the foe ere they fell. Yet the impenetrable line of Saxons held the crest unbroken, and once more the scales of fate seemed turning against the Normans: one moment longer and again would the invaders have been beaten back by the intrepid sons of the soil.

"Now relics befriend us!" cried the bishop, as an esquire handed him his bow, and the arrow headed with the holy nail, the present of the Pope to Duke William. "I vowed, that if the battle went hard this arrow should turn it: high in the air let it fly, and Heaven direct its fall!"

Whizzing the shaft disappeared in the skies, and the man, the words, the act, all drew attention from friends and foes. For an instant their struggle ceased—the uplifted axe hung in air, and knee to knee, and shield against shield for a moment kept their hostile pressure motionless. Harold, whose glance watched all changes of that tumultuous field, beheld with surprise this sudden suspension of the fight: following with his eyes the upcast looks of the combatants, the descending arrow struck deep into his brain, and the great the glorious hero fell a corpse. A loud wailing cry run through the Saxon ranks, and the shout of victory issued from the exulting Normans.

"*Dex aie* and forward! Now brave Toustain, now! By the splendour of God, the day is our own!" shouted William, as with his whirling mace he rushed forward and struck the strong bearer of the Saxon standard to the earth; then Toustain, careering hard upon his chief's lead, planted the sacred banner of the Pope, while the duke beat down all who tried to rally round the body of their monarch. The Norman warriors soon clustered around, and the fight for the fourth time waged madly, but the Saxons had lost the crest of the height and their leader! Still the combat was maintained upon the table-land, and desperately; till no longer able to resist the Normans, who swarmed upon their flank, the Saxons slowly gave ground: they did not fly, but beaten by their want of discipline yielded.

So fought, so fell the Saxon soldiers of the great Harold. Broken but desperate, they still strove furiously,

Digitized by Google

and only step by step did the Normans win their way in carnage.

The position was lost, the Saxon army staggered, reeled, and back, back, back; the invaders forced the island combatants; when, lo! a new leader appeared—it was Editha! Her countenance calm, her eye shining with a feverish lustre, her face of a deadly hue. She sat firmly on her white barb, her hair was loose and dishevelled, the golden fly above her forehead alone seemed to have held its place in the disorder of her white dress, which was stained with the blood of the wounded; a light shield was on her left arm, apparently placed there against her will, for she seemed indifferent to the protection which it afforded. Following her closely was the Vala, strange, wild, and impatient, but checked by the calmness of Editha's master spirit. With these came the big Gunilda; her eyes flashed, she carried a battle-axe, was clothed in a shirt of mail smeared with gore, and seemed to wait impatiently for work as the queen rode into the combat.

"Elstan, is it true that the king is slain?" said Editha to a gory warrior resting on his target, bleeding and exhausted.

"Yes lady, it is true! Fly hence, for nought but death is here; away, for the love of God away! Where are Sweyne, Morcar, Ailwin, Gurth, Canute?"

"There is Canute," answered the huntsman, pointing to a man who was a few yards in front, cheering on his fellows, and with his weapon dealing rude blows around. Morcar at that moment came up.

"Fly! fly Editha! all is lost!"

"Yes, for me Morcar, but not yet for the Saxons. Seest thou that bank? Between it and where we now stand there is a deep moat filled with weeds, so as to appear like the firm greensward around. It has a sudden fall, and is deep, but there are firm passages across it where I have left men to mark them for our retiring soldiers. Give way here, rally on that dyke, and there we may yet save the day."

"I see," cried Earl Erick the Forester, seizing the advantage of the movement with the quickness of a warrior's eye.

Digitized by Google

"But fly thou Editha," said Morcar, "for Heaven's sake fly, or you will be slain!"

"I fear not Morcar. I will not fly. To the dyke—to the dyke! I see the Normans gathering upon the flanks. Ride everywhere, and cry—To the dyke!"

On the word, Erick, Morcar, Gunilda, and the Vala rode along the battle. "*To the dyke—to the dyke!*" rung through that bloody field.

As Editha turned her horse to lead, an arrow struck her shield.

"Good shield," said she, "save me till I restore the battle, and then I have done with thee, for thou wouldst keep me from the death I yearn for. There, there brave Saxons, there must be your stand!" she cried aloud, riding swiftly, and pointing to the dyke; "but mind the passes of the ditch. The victory will yet be ours."

"All is lost! the king is killed! all is lost!" cried a coward wretch, as he cast away his arms for flight.

"No, no! the king is not killed; he waits you on the dyke! To the dyke I say, to the dyke!" The shrill voice of Editha, as she half-shrieked these words with a desperate effort, was heard even in the din of that dread tumult; and the brave hearts who heard it, and all who beheld the queen, seemed animated with new fury for the contest. The rush for the opening was now general, and as they passed, Editha, and the remaining Saxon thanes, ranged them hastily on the low dyke which scarcely rose above the rest of the ground, but had the deep marshy ditch in front. The brave Saxons who covered the retreat, kept us at bay while their countrymen occupied the new ground, and then themselves retired across the passes.

The desperate resistance made against the foremost Normans allowed time for those invaders who were in the rear to close up; a pause in the sanguinary fray took place, and the exhausted armies for a moment fronted each other, breathless and desperate. Some rested panting on their swords and long heater shields, others on their battle-axes; many leaped from their horses in haste to draw tight their saddle-girths; all were breathing hard, and most were bleeding with wounds, while imprecations and abuse, and

Digitized by Google

defiance, were poured forth by either hosts. The fiery William was not in front; his horse had been slain by Elstan, and ere he could mount a fourth charger the battle had passed forward.

Seizing the moment, Editha passed at speed along the Saxon front, exclaiming,—

"No flying Saxons! faithful to the death! your queen leads you!" The cessation from havoc was but momentary.

"Why halt ye sirs? forward, and set upon these Saxon dogs!" cried the fierce Odo, as he brandished his club, and spurred his hot charger against the defenders of the dyke. The appeal was answered by the courageous Normans, and the mailed champions of Neustria and Armorica again dashed forward with an appalling yell.

"The rood, the rood! the holy rood!" echoed along the dyke, and the charging Norman squadrons, blinded by rage, saw not the ditch, mistook the thick green weeds for the sound sod, and down, down they went, headlong into the traitorous fen, where the mud covered them. A taunting laugh pealed from the ranks above, and javelins and stones were hurled upon the struggling men below. Astounded by the fall of those in front, the Normans checked their charge, but those behind still pushed them with resistless pressure into that insatiate quagmire, while Editha led the Saxons forward to the attack through the firm passages across the greedy swamp. Sallying thus, with hideous outcries, the battle raged more terribly than ever. Nearly all the Saxon chiefs had fallen around their king; but bold leaders are never wanting where brave men abound, and the storm burst vengeful on the foe as the shouting Saxons, ethel-born and ceorl-born, chiefman and socman, burst from the dyke, outgushing as a torrent. The battle thunder rolled from the nearer heights, along the distant hollows, rising and falling, as the press and turmoil of war poured its overboiling violence. Clattering blows resounded, helm and shield were bent and rived, ruthless imprecations met unheeded prayers, and spear and sword, and seax, and curtle-axe, and battle-axe, drove through shattered armour, freeing souls from carnal tenements.

Digitized by Google

Heedless of danger Editha rode, pallid and tranquil, through the contest.

"Forward Saxons! forward! your queen is with you!" were now the only words she uttered, while the Vala held high the cross, and the Amazonian Gunilda fought in the thickest of the strife.

Three times did the chivalrous Bishop Odo rally the Norman knights, but unable to withstand the storm they gave way, and victory was once more with the Saxons.

At that crisis Duke William arrived, fresh mounted. He saw all the danger. He sent his loud voice ringing through his fainting battalions, and they rallied.

"Save yourself sire; we are lost if we retire not on the instant," whispered the experienced Eustache of Boulogne, as he leaned forward to approach the ear of the hero. Those words were his last.

"Ha villain! I have thee now," screamed a female voice, like the cry of the sea-mew in the storm. It was the voice of Gunilda, and her axe descended on the poll of Eustache. He fell heavily from his horse, his arms clanked with a dead sound, and the parting breath of life rattled in his throat.

"That caitiff for thy deeds at Dover! Now my father, thy daughter has avenged thee! Saxons; follow Gunilda!"

"And her son Ethelred," shouted a youth, as he darted forward with the spear that he had snatched from the expiring Eustache.

"Art thou there Ethelred? Varlet, get thee hence," said Gunilda, as she attacked Aumari de Thuars.

"Nay mother mine, not so; I am thy son," and he thrust the deadly spear into the throat of the Norman.

"Thou *art* mine own son by Odin! On, Saxons, the day is ours!" the next instant she fell pierced by an arrow.

And the day was not theirs. Death had thinned the ranks of both armies, and they closed in one confused and serried mass of combatants, so that the fate of that great duel hung no longer upon the cunning of leaders, but upon the thews and sinews of those intrepid and struggling gladiators.

Digitized by Google

"Mallet! Odo! Beaumont! Fitzosborne! close in, knights, and follow me!" exclaimed the duke, and he charged like the blast of the whirlwind.

Outnumbered and exhausted, the Saxons gave ground, bleeding, but battling still as they retreated before the fierce duke, who was again on foot making fearful breaches through the serried shields, which, vainly opposed his gigantic strength.

"Fly" said Canute, as he reeled towards the queen, and fell dead beneath her horse's feet.

"Oh fly! fly!" exclaimed the Vala, who now came up, faint with her great exertions.

"No Frica," answered Editha; "I will not fly! Fly, and save yourselves, but I quit not the field!" Suddenly her horse was killed by a stone cast from an engine: she Editha was stunned by the fall.

"I could bear all but this," cried the Vala, who thought that the queen was slain; and then shrieking curses upon the duke as he now bore close upon them, she kissed the cross, and drove a seax into her own heart!

Then the monks, and the boy Ethelred, aided by some soldiers, rapidly bore off the senseless queen, while the Saxons, to protect her, made one desperate effort more; it was the last sparkle of heroic valour, and soon the flight began.

The Normans pursued, reckless, merciless, exulting, slaying, trampling; and long after the light had departed, the sounding blows of death were heard echoing among the woods in the pitchy darkness of that night—that dreadful night which closed for ever upon the day of Saxon glory!

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER LV.

Editha's story is briefly told,
Her brain grew heavy, her heart grew cold:
"My Harold is gone!"—she bent her head,—
"I clung to him living, I'll cling to him dead."
Yet meekly she her sorrow bore,
Meekly resigned the crown she wore.

SCARCELY had the victorious army given up pursuit, through the obscurity, and reassembled on the field of its triumph, than the pale moon arose, casting her effulgence over the ensanguined battle-ground: thousands and tens of thousands there lay, all grim and ghastly to the view; the silvery light displayed their gashes, and showed the blood of life yet trickling from the wound. Here and there the imprisoned soul still shook its mortal habitation with convulsive quiverings, marking approaching death; and faint moanings, testifying man's cruelty, still floated on the air from distant parts of the field.

"Now" exclaimed the Conqueror, "let us kneel and thank the Almighty, who has given us this great victory."

As he said this, the remnants of the Neustrian army laid their stained weapons down, kneeled and raised their bloody hands in solemn invocation to the Deity. Odo, gory and mitred, chanted forth hymns of peace and goodwill towards man, and thankfulness, and masses for the slain! But they, the living men who kneeled beside him, were they alone his congregation? Oh no! there were others that heard him not! they lay bloodless, upon the heights and in the fields around, proclaiming with mute but harrowing eloquence the mockery of the scene! The splendour of the moon shed its pure brilliance over that polluted and unholy picture, as if to say, "Man behold your deeds! is it *here* ye dare to pray!"

In truth, good Robert Wace, it was a very blasphemy,

Digitized by Google

and I could not give thanks that night: stern as William Mallet was, he wept for the friends of those bloodless bodies that lay bleaching around in heaps. Sixty thousand Saxons there weltered in their blood; and the men who had done this butchery were kneeling to the God of all, amidst the impious havoc!

Here the knight paused, he seemed for a moment absorbed in thought, but, starting, added fiercely, as if doubtful of himself,—

But it was not *our* battle! that ocean of blood was not on *our* souls! Then, in a gentler tone continued,—

The Conqueror has long since answered for it, and the judgment he has received no man can tell: it concerns not William Mallet.

When prayers were over we began to inter the slain Normans, writing down as killed the names of all those who answered not when called; of these there were above twenty thousand—in sooth it was a hardly earned victory.

While we were thus employed a fresh scene of woe took place: the two monks of Waltham presented themselves to the Conqueror. They were followed by a long train of holy men, and came over that desecrated hill chanting a requiem for the dead. As the solemn harmony flung its floating strains upon the still air, the soldiers ceased to speak or move, all listening to the mournful melody. The procession wound slowly down the steep, threading among the slain, where scant space was found for living foot to fall unwet with human gore. The sacred band advanced, exalting the reproachful crucifix amidst the sacrilegious desolation; censers in front cast incense, whose curling smoke caught the moonbeams, and circling upwards seemed in conjunction with that solemn dirge, more acceptable to Heaven than did the fierce Odo's exultant prayers.

The tonsured supplicants came to demand in God's name that they might inter the dead.

"Mercy great Conqueror! mercy to the vanquished!"

"It is granted to all," answered William; "I war not with the dead! and I will prove my words holy fathers, even now in your presence. Where is the knight who smote the dead body of Harold with his sword? Bring him before

Digitized by Google

me?" The knight came forth: "Give me thy sword," said the duke, and in a voice of anger that always made those about him quail. The knight tremblingly obeyed. William, taking the weapon in his gauntleted hands, broke it into pieces.

"There base and recreant soldier! know that he who insults a dead enemy is as much disgraced as he who turns his back upon a living one! Get thee hence!"

The caitiff sneaked away, condemned and cast out by all.

"Now holy fathers, do such honour to the dead as best beseemeth you, without further let or hindrance."

"Sire!" said the monks, "we still crave a boon at thy hands: in the name of the Saviour of the world, grant us the body of Harold?"

William paused for a moment; but the natural generosity of his disposition, not being opposed by any political advantage, swayed him.

"Granted, even that traitor's corpse; but ye will have some trouble ere ye find it amidst the heaps of slain. Sir William Mallet, hie thee with these good monks, and take such order that none insult them, nor offer indignity to the body of Harold, nor to any Saxon, dead or alive. Where Harold fell, and where his standard stood, shall a convent be erected in memory of this great battle."

The monks bowed to the victor, and proceeded up the height.

On arriving there, good clerk, the moonlight fell upon an awful sight. A kneeling female figure, her white garments steeped in blood, hung over the disfigured corpse of Harold; a profusion of hair hid her head, but her lips seemed to be pressed to his. The fatal arrow drawn from the wound lay before her, and hillocks of slain rose about her, out of which she had drawn the mangled corpse. As we approached, she raised her head—it was Editha! Her beauteous face was greatly agitated. "I will not quit him—kill me if ye will, murderers! ye shall not divide me from him now." With a violent tone she spoke, dropped a cross she held and clasped the dead body in her arms with maniac look and energy, raising it from the ground and pressing the head to her breast.

Digitized by Google

"Dear lady" said Wulstan, "knowest thou not thy friends? We are all thine own."

"Then who is that Norman—what does he here? Ha! Sir William Mallet, is it thou? Get thee hence, thou murderer of the Saxons! Look here, bloodthirsty man, and see what ye have done! Hence from my sight, or finish thy hateful work, and add the blood of Editha to that which now clots upon thy horrid weapon; it is the only Saxon blood that Editha can spare thee, and dying she will bless the hand that sheds it."

I could not answer boy, but at that instant I wished the big Saxon had slain me, ere I beheld this sad sight of woe. The good monk saw that I could not answer.

"Lady" said he, "we have leave to bear the body hence to Waltham; and this good knight——"

"Callest thou a Norman good? O Wulstan! Wulstan! cast thine eyes here, and all around, and with thy Saxon tongue canst thou call Normans good?"

"Dear lady of the Saxons! patience, patience! Behold this!" said the monk as he picked up her crucifix; "let not that fall! for quitting it, what shall support us in this world of miseries—*with it*, what shall we fear?"

"Father thy reproof is just, but call not the Normans good, and tell this Norman to go hence from the sight of Editha."

"Let us all hence that we may pay the last homage to the body of the king, and inter his mortal remains with due religious rites at Waltham; and let us hasten for day will soon dawn and the victor may change his will, and then who shall say him nay?"

Editha consented.

"O God, I am in thine hands! I see there is one way in which these hateful Normans can yet make Editha tremble;" again she kissed the cold lips of Harold and rose up to let the monks take his body, which they laid upon a bier; and proceeded to Waltham.

The rumour soon spread that the Saxon people would be safe if they came to bury the dead, and that sorrowful field was quickly covered with wailing and distracted women and children.

Digitized by Google

Then the Normans marched towards Dover, and being fearful of the danger to which Editha was exposed, I followed her to Waltham; the Conqueror had given me strict charge to maintain all that country in tranquillity and free from pillage—for so his policy demanded. I never saw Editha more after this day, but heard what passed from the good works of that holy monastery; nor did that noble lady know till long after how much she was beholden to William Mallet for the safety she enjoyed, and that he saved her vast possessions from confiscation.

When Editha and her melancholy train approached Waltham, she was met by a vast multitude of unarmed Saxons, men women and children and as the bloody corpse of the slain king passed by lamentations arose, and loud wailings filled the air. Then, moved by some sudden impulse, and with one accord, that great throng of mourners fell upon their knees in silence and in prayers for the slain.

"Stop" cried Editha to the bearers of the body; "set him down, and on these hallowed relics let me pray in the midst of the people for whom he has fallen."

There was a small tumulus hard by, and on this spot, where the bones of inhumated warriors reposed, they laid the lifeless hero of the Saxons. Editha kneeled beside the remains of her husband, her lips moved in silent prayer, a few big tears rolled down her wan face, and her eyes were bent with an expression of doubt on those disfigured features, as if yet searching for life; then hopelessly raising her looks to heaven, like one imploring pity in this dread moment of bitterest agony, she prayed inwardly. And all that multitude prayed with her; and thousands were there, like her bereaved of all; and thousands still poured in upon that vast crowd, fresh, horror-stricken, from the field of desolation, while convulsive sobs and maniac screams here and there disturbed the religious silence.

Then sung the monks a loud Saxon dirge in honour of the fallen. Editha stooped over the body, and her rich hair hid the tears which streamed upon the face of Harold, mingling with his blood. The assembled Saxons joined in the hymn, and when the sacred song ceased, the body was again

Digitized by Google

raised and borne to the grave within the chapel; but not by the monks—twelve Saxon warriors whose wounds were fresh, burst from the crowd.

"Lady we fled not from the field; we long lay senseless amidst the slaughter; we stood by thy husband in many a battle, we deserted him not yesterday, and we will yet die fighting upon his body, if so the Normans please, for not without a blow shall the guards of Harold fall. Like these weapons," said they, showing their battle-axes gory and gapped, "we are injured, but not yet broken."

Editha held out her hand to the speaker but had no power to do more; they kissed her proffered hand, lifted the body of their lifeless monarch, and, as the solemn dirge again arose, they bore him to the tomb. No stings of conscience smote these warriors: they had been faithful to their country and to their monarch.

The earth was now cast upon the coffin of Harold. It fell with a sound that jarred, ruthless, cold, withering upon the heart of Editha. It was the last sound she heard. She sunk lifeless in the arms of those who stood around her. When she recovered, she found herself in bed; her weeping companions, Rose and Winifred, were by her side. The good Wulstan entered; he reasoned with the sorrowing queen, but Editha found consolation in her own reflection alone, which told her that life swiftly passes—that health and strength were not bestowed upon her to cast away as things of no value, and must be nourished.

"Go poor suffering companions; take rest and nourishment, and with God's good help we shall never be divided but in death. All earthly happiness has passed from us: here let us abide and serve the God of heaven and of earth—He who decreed that we should survive this dreadful battle. Here let us remain till that blest hour shall come which takes us from this strange world of mysteries for ever. Go, and when ye have had due rest and nourishment, return to me. Good father get thee hence also, and let me suffer no interruption, my brain requires sleep, if sleep will fall upon one so wretched; but I must be alone." And Editha was left alone with one wish—the wish to die!

Digitized by Google

Overpowered by the violence of her grief, she fell into a troubled sleep. Awaking, all the dreadful truth rushed upon her at once.

The world was now a solitary prison. Death was her only friend, and he refused his aid.

"Two days agone" said she, "Harold lived, loved me, was here with his army—ruled the land! And now!" she shut her eyes, but could cast no darkness over the vivid picture of desolation.

"A few short hours have passed since he clasped me, told me to go to Waltham, he would soon be with me, and victorious. Since this, but a few hours have passed, and now dead! for ever gone from me! The battle has been fought. The Saxons are lost. Harold, my beloved, my idol, is dead! Cold in his grave—and I am here alive and well! Oh, no! I am not well: her whose soul is on the rack, whose heart is agonized, is not well! Great God! extend thy mercy, and take me from this misery. World! world! what art thou to me without my Harold?—a wilderness—a desert—a grave, in which I am buried alive and alone! I am stretched on the rack of life, the rack of torturing consciousness that Harold is gone for ever—for ever! O God that word! I cannot bear it! No, no, no! not for ever! Can I so love, so idolize, and be separated from him for ever? Is my heart doomed to the recollection of his virtue, his love, and my own devotion to this worshipped object of all my affection—only to break it? Spirit of goodness, this cannot be thy work—impossible! The infernal demon of Evil falls upon me with his torments, and in thee, O great and good God, do I trust for support in this hour of cruel suffering! Thou tellest me it is *not* for ever. O Harold, my love, look down upon me!—guard me, guide me, till death comes, and then catch me up in thy arms and bear me away—bear me to those regions of bliss where I may again be restored to that happiness which your departure has destroyed! Oh, come, come—if but for one moment come!—let me see thee, speak to thee, bid thee adieu once more! Father in heaven, let this cup pass from my lips, for madness presses on my brain and there is no relief but death!"

* * * * * *

Digitized by Google

Time gradually produced a state of resignation to her life of sorrow, and when Matilda came to England the following letter told her, that her former friend, her predecessor on the throne, still lived :—

"EDITHA TO MATILDA.

"To thee, Matilda I send the crown I once wore. While shared with Harold, this gift of the Saxons was dear to me. Harold is slain; the Saxons are no longer a people. Take then their crown, and let it bespeak thy protection for the oppressed."

Editha still lives, feeling that all things are directed and governed by the mighty power of good and evil. The evanescence of sublunary affairs renders little worthy of regard. The mortal who takes wisdom for a guide is above misfortunes, and struggles against the sorrows of a transitory separation, and, with divine truth for support, patiently awaits death in FAITH, HOPE, and CHARITY.

THE END.

COX AND WYMAN, PRINTERS, GREAT QUEEN-STREET LONDON.

Digitized by Google